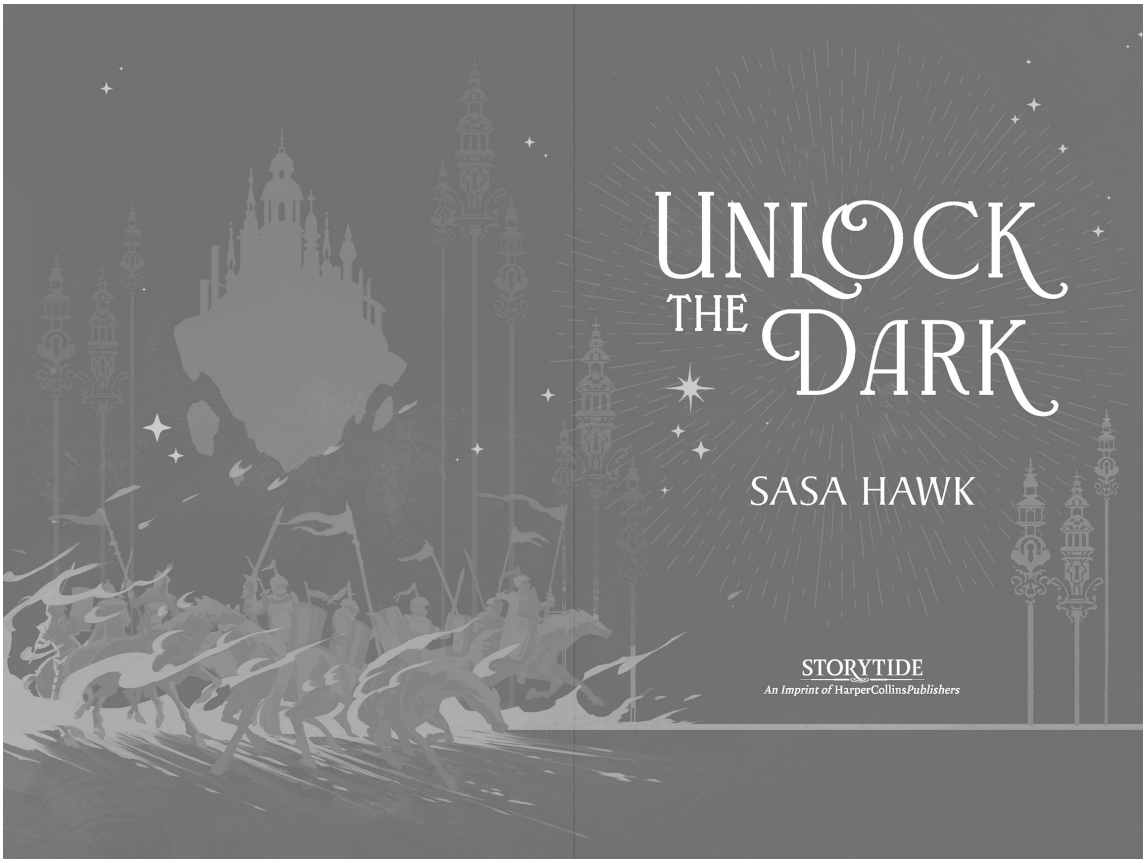
UNLOCK THE DARK

SASA HAWK



OceanofPDF.com

Dedication

To those who are lost in the dark.
May you find the light that leads you home.

OceanofPDF.com

Contents

Cover
Title Page
Dedication

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27

Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Epilogue

Acknowledgments
About the Author
Back Ad
Copyright
About the Publisher

OceanofPDF.com

1

If this greasy little scholar didn’t get out of her personal space, Elia was going to throw the stupid mystery box in his face. No matter that they had a contract. No matter that she really needed the money from this job. The scholar’s dust-and-ink scent strangled her as he hovered over her shoulder. As if he couldn’t allow more than an arm’s length between him and the black enameled box she’d been hired to unlock.

“So, can you do it?” His voice had an uneasy tremor. Odd. He was the one who had initiated their arrangement. Why be nervous?

“Of course I *can*, Salvius. I’m trying to decide if I *should*.”

He huffed, and his breath smelled of oily tavern meat and cheap beer. She wrinkled her nose. He leaned closer, placing a hand on the back of the creaking chair they’d given her.

“Excuse me?” He bristled with indignation. “You most certainly *should*. We had a deal. You can’t possibly be thinking of reneging.”

Elia’s gaze flicked up to his face. His nostrils were flared, and he seemed on the brink of saying something regrettable. Her knuckles whitened as she gripped the box, and a collective gasp went around the room. About fifteen scholars had crammed into the tiny guild house foyer to watch her unlock an old box with unknown contents. Farther back in the house, the general hum of other scholars going about their business continued despite the sudden silence in the foyer.

Elia glared at him. “Back up or I walk out right now and never work with your guild again.” A bluff. Gold was gold, and gods knew she couldn’t afford to decline a job. She had to keep the wolf from the door, after all.

Salvius blushed and immediately stepped back. “Apologies, Conjurista. And please be gentle with the box. It hasn’t been opened in over five hundred years.”

No one had mentioned that little fact in the precontract negotiations. They’d called it an *heirloom*, but five hundred years made it a historical artifact. Anything could be inside. A curse-scroll. An enchanted weapon. A portal to the afterlife. She shuddered.

Despite its benign aura, there were a concerning number of wards and curselocks around the box. In her experience, when that much care had been placed into locking something away, then it was best kept bound. The box was small enough to fit in her lap, lightweight, and rustled a little when she shook it, which had caused half the scholars to cry out.

This group of scholars were much younger than their invitation had implied. None of them could have been older than twenty. They were all male, with matching tattoos on their hands to indicate their guild. Identical library insignias shimmered in embroidered designs on their tunics. Why were a bunch of teenage male scholars interested in a five-hundred-year-old warded box? She should have asked more questions before signing their contract.

She met Salvius's eyes. "It seems this is a good time to remind you that my contract clearly stipulates that the contents of the box must be harmless or I will not proceed with unlocking it."

Salvius raised one of his overplucked eyebrows and pursed his thin lips. "And? We assured you they are indeed harmless. Though we don't know what's inside, we've been able to determine the contents are nonmagical." Several of the scholars nodded at this. "And furthermore, we have very informed guesses about the category of the contents and believe them to be . . . educational in nature."

One of the younger scholars snickered, and Elia whipped her head to him. "What's so funny?"

The scholar turned bright red and looked helplessly at Salvius, who pinched his nose and let out a breath. "Nothing. Ignore him. He's just nervous."

Elia frowned at him. "Why are there so many wards on something harmless and *educational*, as you say?"

Salvius shrugged. "Such things were customary back then. Please, Conjurista, the box."

The scholars leaned in, all eyes on her. This could so easily go wrong. She should rip up their contract and go home.

But . . . rent was due soon. The creditors would be after her like hungry dogs if she missed another payment. Her siblings would go hungry. And these scholars were paying three times her normal rate.

Her chin lifted defiantly. "Fine. But whatever happens next is on your head, not mine."

Elia closed her eyes and ran her fingers over the box, allowing her magic to explore the locks and wards. The spellwork was simple. Brutal. If anyone other than the original owner of the box tried to open it, their fingers would instantly wither to the bone. But with her talent, tricking the wards and unlocking it would be easy. This wasn't even the primary use of her magic. Not that the scholars needed to know that. Let them think she worked hard for their gold.

She opened her eyes and looked at Salvius again. Just behind him, a new scholar had joined the group. He stood tall and broad next to the lanky and waifish figures of the others. He was sun-bronzed and groomed neatly compared with their pale faces with patchy thin beards. On another day, she might have been more interested, but she was working and needed to focus. Salvius had the gold, so he was the most important person in the room right now.

"Pay now if you wish to continue," she said.

Salvius jingled his leather purse and then crossed his arms. "Open the box first."

That had not been their deal. "Honor the contract, Salvius. Pay up front in full, or the box can stay locked for another five hundred years for all I care."

"Yes, Conjurista," he gritted out, and dropped a heavy purse in her outstretched hand.

Elia quickly tallied the gold, and when she was satisfied he hadn't cheated her, she lifted the box to her lips. Confused murmurs from the gathered scholars accompanied her quiet incantation. *Why is she licking it?* one hissed. *That's how they work, idiot*, another retorted.

"Silence, everyone," Salvius finally said. "Let the woman work."

Elia's magic untangled the wards bit by bit until, at last, the key formed in her mouth. Sliding the new key into the tarnished lock, Elia smiled. The sound of the lock mechanism releasing as she turned the key was so satisfying.

She stood and was about to hand the box to Salvius, but he looked a little too eager. Too rushed. Then it hit her. Where were the masters? The specialists? Wouldn't they be interested in an artifact this ancient? Why had she trusted this group? Or Salvius, for that matter. None of them could be more than a few years out of their apprenticeships. Maybe they weren't

supposed to have the box, and their elders weren't here because they didn't know. The contents must be truly dangerous.

"You have our thanks, Conjurista, but we'll take it from here." Salvius reached for the box.

Elia was shaking her head before his fingers could graze the lid. "I don't think so. Something isn't right."

"I assure you it's fine." He spoke placatingly, as if she were a cornered animal about to frenzy. "Your contract was simply to unlock it. We'll open it."

Her fingers twitched on the key as he grasped the box. "How can I check my work if I don't open it?"

Salvius growled in frustration. "Let go of the box, Conjurista."

"No, I'm going to open it." She yanked it back, but he held on.

He was shorter than her, but his spindly scholar fingers were surprisingly strong as the two of them tugged the box back and forth. This little group was up to something, and she'd just helped them with whatever it was. The gnawing worry in her stomach grew more insistent, and her breathing quickened. Salvius needed to let go right *now*. Elia pulled as hard as she could.

"What is the meaning of this ruckus?" a hoarse voice boomed. "Scholar Salvius, why are you accosting this young woman?"

Salvius chose that moment to let go of the box, and in her surprise, Elia released it as well, stumbling backward. The box arced high over their heads. A dozen shouts filled the room. Everyone reached for the box. The lid flipped open as it sailed through the air, and ancient scraps of parchment fluttered in its wake like a flock of butterflies in a summer breeze. The box hurtled toward the tall scholar, whose eyes went wide as he realized its trajectory.

Several things happened at once. The tall scholar caught the box. Salvius stammered hurried apologies and half explanations to the master who'd walked in. Some of the young scholars eagerly collected scraps of parchment, and others yelled for everyone to be careful.

She'd been worried about a dangerous curse. But the scholars who had managed to seize parchment pieces were grinning like the cat who got the cream. Some of them were already reading the scraps to their friends and giggling. Scholars giggling! Oh, they had known *exactly* what had been in the box. She had no doubt now.

Elia snatched a piece of parchment from the air and looked at the elegant script. And immediately blushed harder than she ever had in her life. It contained lines of some of the most explicit and romantically daring poetry she'd ever seen.

Someone cleared his throat in front of her. "I, uh, think those go in here."

It was the tall scholar. Based on his obvious discomfort and unwillingness to meet her eyes, he'd seen what was on the parchment as well.

"Right." Elia snatched the box from him and dropped the parchment back inside as if it had singed her fingers.

He bent to pick up more of the pieces. Some of them had drawings accompanying the text, absolutely scandalous images illustrating the poetry. This could not be more awkward. She turned to Salvius, ready to yell at him. But the master had beat her to it.

"And the nerve," he was shouting, "of a bunch of untried boys breaking into the scroll vault to steal one of our oldest artifacts. Did you think no one would notice? You chose to open the Trove of Beleor in the front foyer of the house, with an outsider no less. What were you thinking? Every last scholar in this room is hereby banned from the vault for three months, and during that time, all of you are going to be given the filthiest, most difficult grounds work we can imagine for you. The absolute gall."

The short, wrinkly man was shaking with rage, his white beard nearly pink as it huffed with his red cheeks. Salvius's head was dropped in a posture of submission and apology. Elia almost felt bad for him. Almost. She approached them with the box, and both their gazes snapped to her. Salvius looked longingly at it and then glared at her. Like it was her fault his friends had broken their guild rules. She was only here for the gold.

"Give me that," the elder snapped. "How did you even open this? It should be impossible."

She shrugged. "I'm a key Conjurista. It was easy."

His eyes narrowed at her. "Easy? This box was warded by some of our best locking masters."

Elia swallowed her scoff. He was serious. Their best? Clearly the guild needed better locking masters, because it had barely taken any effort from her. Not wanting to anger him further, she remained silent, simply shrugging again, and dropped the box into his extended arms. She took a

few steps toward the door. Time to put this strangeness behind her and go home.

“Wait,” the elder cried out. “Aren’t you going to restore the wards and lock?”

Elia looked back at him and smirked. “Apologies, Master Scholar. My magic only unlocks.”

Salvius was taking advantage of the master’s distraction to read some of the parchment scraps. His cheeks were bright red. The other scholars were either pocketing parchment segments or returning them to the box. But the tall scholar hadn’t taken his eyes off her. He hadn’t seemed interested in the box at all, just curious about her presence. It was too bad he’d get the same punishment as the others even though he wasn’t actually involved. But none of this was her problem. The weight of Salvius’s purse in her pocket reminded her that she had other pressing issues.

“Farewell, Salvius. Master Scholar. Pleasure doing business with your guild.” She smiled sweetly.

As the door creaked closed behind her, Elia could hear the master scholar screeching, “You paid her *how much*?”

She laughed a little and headed home.

OceanofPDF.com

2

Elia shoved open the door to her family's travel shop just as her little sister was saying, "We don't offer doors for *those* sorts of meetings, sir."

Elia's stomach clenched. Saya had better not be turning away a commission, even if she disapproved of its purpose. This was exactly why Isak was supposed to be on shop duty. Not Saya. Never Saya.

A tall, middle-aged man whirled to face Elia, irritation verging on insult written all over his aristocratic face. He wore an outlandish floppy hat and an expensive silk shirt, both covered in illusory, fluttering butterflies. Embroidered on his shirt was a feather-hilted sword encircled by a stem of thorns. A Featherthorn family crest. Great. Her fourteen-year-old sister had been impolite to a nobleman. Elia gave a light laugh and curtsied to him.

"Good afternoon, Count Featherthorn. Welcome to Tallis Travels. I'm Elia Tallis, key Conjurista and shop manager." He gave a curt nod, and Elia plastered on a tense smile as she approached the counter. "Please excuse me for a moment." She wrapped an arm around Saya's shoulders and guided her to the door. "Saya, my sweet little one. Be a dear and go start dinner upstairs for me." With their backs to the count, Elia gave her sister a scorching death glare.

"But, Elia, he asked for—" Saya tilted her head, long brown spiral curls bouncing with each step. If she ever wanted another ribbon for those curls, she would *not* finish that sentence. Elia squeezed Saya's shoulders in warning, and she winced. "Yes, dear sister. I'll do that right away. And I'll check on Papa too."

A less-than-subtle reminder of Saya's important role in keeping their father alive. Saya opened the door and climbed the stairs to their family's apartment over the shop. The customer glowered at her retreating figure.

Elia returned to the counter and faced the sulking nobleman.

"Count Featherthorn, you honor my family's shop with your presence. Apologies for the delay and any childish prattling my younger sister inflicted upon you during your wait. She's not usually at the counter, for obvious reasons."

He sniffed in acknowledgment, and Elia noted the silver at his temples and the fine lines at the corners of his mouth. His hands were smooth except for the ridges where a wedding band had recently been removed from his finger. A black silk cravat at his throat was the only clue to his mourning state in his riotous ensemble. A tryst door. That had to be his request. It was the only kind Saya objected to. Well, it wasn't Elia's place to judge. Gold spent the same, no matter its origin.

Elia flashed her brightest smile and pulled out her ledger. "Please, sir, take a seat so we can discuss your request." She gestured to the worn velvet chairs beside her modest shop hearth.

As she escorted him, she made a point of walking slowly past Orin, but the count seemed too distracted to notice the boy. Orin sat in his assigned position in front of the big bay window overlooking the busy street where any passersby could see his work in progress. At almost twelve years old, he showed signs of being one of the most talented Threadlorists in the world. He was obsessed with practicing and honing his skills, and he likely hadn't looked up in hours. No magic in the world could tear Orin from his silks when he was mid-tale. Piles of brilliant fabric shimmered at his feet, the embroidery dancing with today's story. His needle moved methodically through the silk, and his eyes had that iridescent shine from enchanting his thread. He probably didn't even know a customer was present.

With the sparkling gems and precious metals woven into Featherthorn's hat, not to mention the enchanted silk butterflies, the count would surely be tempted by threadlore and had the coin to buy it. She just needed to get his attention. Elia stopped and placed a hand on Orin's shoulder.

"That's lovely work, dear brother," she said in the false, sweet tone that should warn him of the customer's presence. "Your talent grows every day. But it's getting dark outside, and we don't want to strain your eyesight. Take today's tales to the closet and help your sister with dinner." She angled toward Count Featherthorn and whispered, "Some requests are best kept between adults."

"Naturally," he responded airily, but his eyes were fixed on Orin's silks. Excellent. "How much for a bolt of this young man's work?"

Orin looked up in perfectly rehearsed surprise, and Elia's fake smile stretched wider. "Oh, I couldn't sell a child's work. He hasn't even apprenticed yet." And when she found a placement for him in a few months, Orin was sure to become famous. Any idiot could see the value in

purchasing the early work of a rising star. And Elia counted on that fact to sell Orin's work. When he would part with it. "He can't legally fulfill commissions or contracts until he's twelve."

The count frowned, pulling all his wrinkles into an unattractive tangle. "I'd pay in gold. Today."

Elia touched her heart in her best approximation of shock. "Good sir! How could I ever explain that entry on our ledger when the royal auditor arrives?" She placed a hand thoughtfully on her chin. "But I suppose . . . well, it's a bit unorthodox. Perhaps I shouldn't suggest it."

The count's eyebrows rose. "Well?"

"If you'd like to purchase one of my brother's practice bolts, I'm sure we could part with it for, say, two months of our shop's rent. Paid directly to our landlord."

Featherthorn took a step back, stirring the silk butterflies on his jacket and hat. "How could a child's work ever be valued at such a price?"

Elia shrugged and said, "You see the work before you. One day, my dear brother will work exclusively for the court, and no one will be able to obtain a commission from him because he'll be so busy with the royal family's couture. Additionally, Orin only works with Elantikan Compassionate Silk, which is harvested after the silkworms have become moths rather than by boiling the worms in their cocoons. I'm sure you're aware how impossible it is to get Elantikan goods right now considering the war has closed off the trading pass." She gave him a pitying look. "But I understand if that paltry amount is a hardship for you."

"Paltry?" he squawked. "Two months' rent in this district is hardly paltry."

Elia gave a reluctant nod and walked toward the sitting area. "Perhaps we should move on and discuss your door request, then. We have many budget-friendly options that may suit you. Go on, Orin. I'll find you shortly."

Orin made a show of slowly wrapping his silk around the bolt so that the nobleman could see the tale unfolding in the enchanted threads. Today's work was a romance. She knew the count wouldn't move until he saw the end of the tale. As Orin tucked the selvage end and pinned it on the bolt, the count slowly shook himself from his lore stupor.

"Two months' rent, then. For this bolt," he said hoarsely. "I'll send it to your landlord via my courier this very evening. My secretary will handle

the details.”

“Agreed.” Elia smiled warmly. Thank all the gods bribing that black market trader for the precious silk had been worth it. “No one will be able to look away when you wear it. I suggest having it tailored into a cape so that the whole tale plays out at once. Orin, is that bolt ready for sale?”

“Y-Yes.”

But he stroked the silk possessively. Not again. She couldn’t deal with his fits at being torn from his art. Not tonight.

“Good. Now leave it there and go upstairs, please.” She raised an eyebrow, daring him to test her.

Orin gave a last look at the silk, sucked in a pained breath, and ran from the room.

“Artists,” she sighed as she ushered the count into the shop’s sitting area and poured a cup of tea for him. “Now, honored count, tell me about your request.”

He went into a long, rambling description of the Bentani Gardens, a popular destination on a continent far to the northwest. Its discreet setting was prized among lovers for secret trysts in the early stages of an affair.

“I remember seeing your father conjure this same door a few years ago,” Featherthorn went on. “You were much younger then, his apprentice, I believe. The way the air shimmered as he drew the door from the elements was breathtaking.”

She gave an uneasy cough. “Yes, well, Papa is extremely talented.”

The count sat back and crossed his ankle over his knee. “It was a lavish conjuring gala. Such a rare and spectacular sight.”

A subtle nudge for her to offer Papa’s services for future travel parties. Elia clutched her ledger. “I recall it well. Unfortunately, Papa’s condition does not allow him to socialize at this time.” Nor did it allow him to conjure doors from thin air like he used to. All she could do was siphon his magic to enchant regular doors.

“A shame. I would have loved to host a conjuring event for a future door.”

“For this particular door, a party would leave you with no chance of discretion. With an *enchanted* door, you can surprise your . . . travel companion. Simply place the enchanted door in the location of your choosing, turn the key, and stroll through it with them. Your land will fade,

and you'll be transported to the lush Bentani Gardens. It's peak bloom season right now. Imagine their delight."

A wistful smile crept over his face, and Elia exhaled in relief.

"That does sound preferable. My companion loves flower season. She could spend ages looking at a single rose." His gaze grew distant.

"Just make sure you return before the forty-eight-hour enchantment ends," Elia said with a light laugh. At his irritated look, she quickly added, "The preset longevity guarantees you'll make the most of every moment."

When they finally agreed on terms, Count Featherthorn swirled his looping signature over more of the commission contract than was necessary. Elia's tense muscles relaxed. The contract, in addition to the threadlore sale and the guild locksmithing she'd done earlier, meant she'd be able to provide for her siblings this month. When he left, Elia replaced the ledger and put the contract in her safe. She was about to close the shop for the evening, but when she turned to the door, a peevish witch was waiting there with her arms crossed.

Elia's hand flew to her chest. "Grivya, you startled me."

The witch raised an arched black eyebrow and scowled at Elia.

"Apologies. You startled me, *Rinna*-Grivya."

Forgetting her honorific wouldn't make the witch any less cranky. Never mind that Grivya had known Elia since birth and was practically a grandmother to her. A very irritable, mercurial grandmother.

"Thank you for coming," Elia continued after her heart slowed to its usual pace.

Rinna-Grivya shuffled farther into the shop. "You should be grateful I came at all. We shouldn't be doing this anymore." It was only a matter of time before she outright denied Elia's request. But not today. It *wouldn't* be today.

Elia gulped. "I don't have a choice. We need the potion. Papa will die without it."

Reaching into her deep apron pocket, Grivya withdrew a crimson vial. The familiar array of age spots and moles on her hands shifted as she rolled the vial between her fingers.

"It's unethical."

"So is letting my little brothers and sister starve." Elia took a breath. Snark would get her nowhere with the witch. "Please, Rinna-Grivya. Remember, it was what Papa asked for. His last request."

“Your father was such a sweet boy. Always so respectful. Your grandfather and I were almost matched, which would have made Carrick *my* boy. And you’re torturing him.”

She said this every time, and it never failed to punch Elia in the gut. Grivya was right, of course. But that didn’t change Elia’s situation. With Grivya’s potion, Elia could keep Papa alive, but it was painful for him. Gods help her. She didn’t *want* to torture Papa. He deserved a peaceful passage through the gates to the afterlife. To reunite with Mama. But what choice did she have?

“It wasn’t supposed to go on this long.” Grivya plopped into one of the velvet chairs, kicked off her cracked leather boots, and stretched her feet toward the dying fire in the hearth. “It’s been over a year. I can’t keep this up just so you can earn a wage. When will it be enough? What makes you think I’ll keep doing this forever?”

Because Grivya had promised. Just over a year ago, Papa had lost consciousness for the last time, his unbeatable illness trapping him in a place beyond waking. Not quite alive, but not quite dead. Papa’s last request for Grivya to help them was as good as a dying wish. Grivya agreed to make an elixir to keep his body fastened to the realm of the living, on the threshold between life and death. It allowed Elia to siphon his magic to earn a purse and keep their shop afloat.

Elia closed her eyes and exhaled slowly. It had been her only viable option at the time. But she’d be able to stop soon.

“Just a little longer, I swear. Two more months should do it.” Elia held up her index finger in the sign of a vow. By then, she’d be nineteen. Legally an adult. She could open her own accounts separate from her father’s debt-ridden ones. More important, she’d be free to marry a suitable partner.

“Humph. So you’ll pay some matchmaker, become a trade worker’s wife, and settle your siblings in schools. What then?”

“Whatever else wives do. I’ll survive.” Elia jutted her chin. It couldn’t possibly be that hard. People were matched every day. Besides, she’d learned the hard way what came of seeking more. “And they’ll be cared for. That’s all that matters.”

Grivya harrumphed again and rubbed her thumb across the vial. “Your plan is noble but stupid. You would tie yourself to some partner you don’t even know? Elia, you are capable of achieving greatness. Instead of marrying for money, you could become independently wealthy if you honed

your Conjurista skills. What will you do with your magic when your father passes?”

Grief cut like a hot knife through Elia’s heart. *When your father passes.* When she would finally let him go in peace to the realm of the dead. When she would lose the man who had taught her to use her magic, who’d shown her how to open the world by unlocking his doors, who’d been her anchor after losing Mama. When she’d truly be an orphan.

Elia swallowed down her sorrow. She had mouths to feed, a shop to keep, bills to pay. There was no time to worry about the rest.

She sat in the chair across from Grivya. “Where could I ever find another door Conjuror like him? People with his type of magic are so rare, and Papa’s skill was unrivaled. Without a door Conjuror at his level to partner with, I’m just a magical locksmith. I can’t build a life on that. In two months, it won’t matter. Hopefully.”

Kissing her palm, she raised it to remind Runa of her affection. An ancient, superstitious custom to honor the goddess of mysteries, secrets, and luck. But perhaps a useless one. None of the gods had ever smiled on her. Still, she made the sign . . . just in case.

“You know as well as I do that you can do so much more than open doors conjured by someone else. You’re ignoring the depths of your potential.” Grivya gave an exasperated sigh.

“Maybe,” Elia said. “But my family comes first.”

Grivya shook her head, her black-and-silver curls bouncing with the motion. “Fine. And how will you pay *me* this time?”

This was always the sticking point between them. In Papa’s last days of consciousness, Grivya had sworn to him, in front of Elia and Isak, that she’d never accept gold from their family. But that didn’t mean her services were free.

“I’ll send you Isak. For a fortnight. A week for each month’s worth of elixir.” Elia fiddled with her bracelet and held her breath. The witch might well decline this arrangement.

“You want me to feed and house your brother for two weeks? On top of giving you this potion that tortures my boy?” She flicked the side of the vial for emphasis.

Elia winced. Having one less mouth to feed for a fortnight *had* been the idea, but Isak could also be useful to Grivya. “He’ll help with your ledgers.

There’s a royal audit next month, and the war tax has gone up again. You’ll need help adjusting for that.”

Grivya snorted. “Like I don’t know how to hide money from whichever stupid collections agent the king sends. Try again.”

But Elia had nothing else to give. Because of Grivya’s blood oath to Papa, she couldn’t take their money, so Elia had to bargain labor. Gods knew none of her other siblings were up to the task. Fourteen-year-old Saya had to stay close to home to look after Papa and couldn’t be trusted to be polite to customers. Eleven-year-old Orin was too obsessed with his threadlore to be good for much else, and eight-year-old Myron was much too young to be helpful to a hope witch. It had to be Isak. He was sixteen, old enough to look out for himself, reliable, and decent enough in math and accounting.

“He’s a genius with the books. You know that.” An eyebrow slant from Grivya made Elia pause. So maybe *genius* was a stretch. “Well, he’ll do a better job than you could. He can clean your shop too.”

“Agreed, but he will take his evening meals and sleep at home.” Grivya withdrew an oathstone from her pocket. There would be no tricking the witch out of her due. Not without consequences anyway. Elia had seen too many other customers learn that lesson the hard way.

Elia pricked her finger on her brooch pin and dropped a bead of crimson blood on the stone. “I vow to give Rinna-Grivya two weeks of Isak’s labor in exchange for two months’ worth of my father’s elixir. This I swear by blood and breath.” A shiver coursed through her as the oath sank into her blood.

“You need to let Carrick go as soon as you can,” Grivya said as she handed the vial to Elia. “When the potion runs out, I’ll help ease his passing. It’s the least I can do after months of hurting him.”

Elia ignored the twinge of shame as she pocketed the vial and escorted Grivya to the shop exit.

“I’ll send Isak tomorrow.”

Grivya grunted and walked out the door without another glance at Elia. She locked the door as the witch strode into the dusky twilight.

A lump rose in Elia’s throat. If Papa could speak, she knew he would condone what she’d done to keep him alive, no matter how long it had been. He’d tell her to drain his magic dry if that’s what it took to care for their family. One day when Elia passed on, he’d meet her in the afterlife

with an embrace and forgiveness. She *knew* that. But that knowledge did nothing to ease the weight of her guilt.

OceanofPDF.com

3

Elia shoved down the grief and turmoil as she climbed the stairs, steeling herself for whatever fresh trouble her siblings would heap on her head tonight. She cracked the stairwell door to the living quarters over the shop and listened.

"No, I said you could taste it *with a spoon*." Saya's whine resounded down the stairs.

"Just heal it already, Saya," Isak snapped.

"No. That burn is what he gets for sticking his whole finger in boiling stew."

Elia winced. Poor Myron. That had to hurt. She trotted up the steps, mentally bracing for chaos. As she opened the door, the usual pandemonium unfolded before her. Myron cried loudly, sucking his finger. Saya grimaced as she stirred a pot at the stove. Isak read in a corner, fingers pressed into his temples in annoyance. Orin rubbed a pile of silks between his fingers as he made a choice for tomorrow's tale. Laundry everywhere. Dirty dishes on every surface. This place had been clean just hours ago. And as always, Papa was stretched out on his sickbed near the hearth. Elia couldn't let her gaze linger there. Not with their quarters in shambles.

"All right!" She announced her arrival in her most commanding tone. "Saya, thank you for making dinner. But please heal Myron's finger." Elia put herself at eye level with her littlest brother. "Myron, when your finger is better, please put all the laundry into a neat pile out of the way. And leave the stew alone until it's ready." She turned to the fabric shelf. "Orin, please gather the dishes. Orin. Orin! Please leave the silks for now and gather dishes. Thank you." And last, she turned to the one who should have taken charge in her absence. "Isak, please put that book down and tidy all this clutter." She gestured at the room. "What happened around here? I left only a *few hours* ago, and suddenly this place looks like a disaster zone. Let's make it habitable again, shall we?"

Elia joined them in the slow transformation of their living room. On days like this, it was easy to forget that they were just children doing their

best with the worst life could throw at them. But they only had to endure a little longer. Just two more months. Then she could set her siblings on their own paths.

They'd go to apprenticeships and training schools where they would be fed, provided for, and taught to use their magic responsibly and profitably. There wouldn't be any more debt collectors, off-the-books work, or hungry nights. They'd be free and safe. And as much as it would gut her not to see them every day, Elia knew it was what was best for them. For herself, she'd find a baker to keep her in bread for the rest of her days. Or a blacksmith with big muscles and a kind heart. Maybe a cobbler who could make a pair of shoes to fit her large feet for once. And then, in the hardest change to come of all, she'd let go of Papa. It would gut her to permanently part with the man who had shown her how to be so much more than a magical locksmith. He'd given her doors to the world, adventure, freedom, and the knowledge that she could do anything.

As she finished tidying the room, Elia glanced at the corner where Papa lay motionless. As always. She had no idea how she was going to help her siblings through his passage.

"Elia?" Saya's sweet tone hinted that she had some idea of the direction of Elia's thoughts and was trying to be gentle. And perhaps it was a bit of an apology for her earlier rudeness to the count. "Did you get Papa's medicine?"

Elia plucked the crimson vial from her pocket. The tears that rose to Saya's eyes as she took the bottle were a dagger to Elia's heart. No child should have to do this to their father.

"I can do it," Elia offered.

"Not as well as I can." Saya wiped her eyes. "He needs a steady hand and a sure amount. Too much will hurt him even worse than . . . well, even worse."

Elia nodded miserably. It was true. Saya's natural healing gifts had kept their father comfortable since he first fell ill. She dreamed of training to be a physician at one of Isalindra's world-renowned medical programs. But the costs of tuition and university fees were far beyond their current means. Perhaps Elia needed to find a banker or barrister rather than a baker or a blacksmith.

Saya angled Papa's head back, and his salt-and-iron curls drifted limply toward his pillow. She placed the dropper between his lips and carefully

administered a dose of the potion. A high-pitched wail escaped his mouth. It was unlike any noise Papa had ever made in his waking life. Proof the potion was torture. The room went silent. As always. Elia hung her head. As always. Two. More. Months.

Elia scraped the remains of the stew pot into Isak's bowl. It was his *third* helping. He was going to eat them out of house and home if his adolescent appetite didn't slow down soon. As they picked at the last of their supper, Elia looked around the table.

"Who wants to go first? Who put money in the coin chest today?" Every day they shared what they had done to contribute to the hidden, magically warded safe under the shop floorboards.

Silence. Why did she always have to go first? "I unlocked a five-hundred-year-old box for a scholars' guild today. For three times my normal rate. And we have a new commission from Count Featherthorn."

Saya raised her brows in curiosity. "Those scholars must have been desperate to get whatever was inside the box."

"They sure were." Elia laughed, silently praying no one would ask the particulars of its contents. "Your turn."

"I healed two feverish shopkeepers and a wounded field hand who came to the back door." Saya twisted her napkin in her lap.

Orin scoffed. "That's it?"

Saya winced and looked away. "I could do more if . . ."

A familiar stab jolted Elia's heart. "It's all right, Saya. You're doing more than your share with Papa. Since you're offering opinions, how about you next, Orin?"

Orin's lower lip wobbled. "I can't talk about it yet. It's too soon." He covered his eyes with one hand.

Isak barked a dry laugh. "Must have been a decent lore-bolt if you were that attached."

"It was the best one I've ever made," Orin declared in a wavering voice.

"How much?" Isak prodded, unconcerned with Orin's sensitivity.

Elia gave Isak a warning look. She grasped Orin's hand. "Two months of rent. Well done, Orin. I'm proud of you." He squeezed his eyes shut and exhaled loudly. Fair enough. At least it wasn't a tantrum this time. "And last but not least, Isak?"

Isak shook his head. “I tried to get Widow Berry to let me help her prepare for the audit, but royal officers kept coming in her shop. She was too nervous to hire me since I don’t have official accreditation. She worried that the officers would see an unlicensed minor tallying her books and fine her.”

“So you contributed nothing, then,” Orin said acidly.

It took Elia a moment to remember why Widow Berry’s jewelry shop would be so busy. “The lovers’ moon rises soon, and the Nalani festival is coming up. The officers were probably all there to pick out trinkets for their sweethearts. That must have been exhausting for the poor old dear.” Isak held up his hands helplessly. “Well, that’s all right. You can visit her another time. Meanwhile, I had to trade two weeks of your labor for Papa’s medicine. For the next fortnight, you’re Rinna-Grivya’s assistant. You’ll eat supper with us and sleep in your own bed. And I only agreed for your help with her accounts and cleaning the shop, so don’t let our favorite old witch make you do anything beyond that. She’ll try to work you to the bone.”

Isak grimaced. “Why didn’t you bargain Saya to her? She’d actually enjoy being around that cranky witch all day.”

“Would not!” Saya exclaimed. “She smells like cabbage and there are rotting mouse corpses all over the shop. Have fun cleaning.” She stuck her tongue out at him.

“You know why Saya stays,” Elia said firmly. “And your work with Grivya bought us two more months with Papa. It’s your contribution to the coin chest. On that note . . .” Elia swallowed and looked around the table. The weight in her tone settled on all of them. Myron actually slumped in anticipation. She didn’t speak of this often, but it was time for a reminder. “We need to have a family discussion. In two months, everything will change. If we keep working hard, we will finally have the savings we’ve been working toward. And on my nineteenth birthday, I’ll be legally allowed to hire a matchmaker and marry. With my savings plus the support of a spouse, you can all get training. If I match well, Isak will finally be able to go to an academy, like Isalindra University, and study in one of any number of programs that recruit Math-mensae.” She paused and glanced at Isak, whose freckled face reddened as he fought a smile. “Saya, you’ll be able to enroll at the Royal Academy of Medicine. Orin, the Royal Sartorialist will probably kidnap you on sight when he sees your threadlore.” Saya and Orin both grinned. “And Myron will stay with me

and whoever I marry until he's old enough to apprentice for whatever his magic will be. All we have to do is hang on until then."

The room was silent except for the crackling logs in the hearth and Papa's steady breathing. Myron was the first to speak.

"But we'll have to say goodbye to Papa," he said, lower lip trembling. Saya put her arm around his shoulders.

There was no point in lying to him. No one had lied to her when it was their mother's turn for passage. "Yes. I'll have to pay his passage through the gate and hire a death priest to conduct the ceremony." Elia made her tone as soothing as possible. "When we're ready, we'll pick a day together. And Rinna-Grivya promised to help. Papa would be proud we've made it this long. But we need to let him rest. He deserves peace. We just need to do our best to make ends meet for two more months, and then we'll all start a new life."

Pearl-drop tears rolled down Myron's cheeks, and his neck and ears flushed cherry red. "B-But I don't want a new life. I w-want to keep this one." He hiccuped.

Saya winced at Elia and stood. "Come on, Orin. I'll help you put your silks away."

Isak grabbed his bowl and Orin's. "I think it's my turn for dishes."

Elia sighed. It wasn't their fault they couldn't face something so hard. Papa's passage would leave a hole in all their hearts. Another absence they'd never be able to reconcile.

Mama had died when Elia was fifteen. She'd gotten an illness that no Healer had been able to cure. Papa had shielded them all from the worst of it and managed to keep life as normal as possible for them during those difficult days. Now it was up to Elia to bear that burden.

Myron ran to her and crawled into her lap. "Why didn't you ask me what I did today?" he asked, resting his head on her shoulder. His hair smelled like sugar and sunshine, but his cheeks were still wet with freshly shed tears.

"Because we all know what you did," Elia said gently. "You were at Andek and Maisie's bakery while we worked. Even though that doesn't put money in our coin chest, it helps the people we love during a very busy time for them."

He fidgeted and looked at his feet. "All I did was sweep and wash bowls while Maisie enchanted sweets. I think Andek was out doing carpenter

work.” He frowned. “But I want to help *our* family too. The others all have magic to trade for money, but I don’t. What if mine never shows up? What if I’m a Stricken and I never get any magic at all?”

How long had that been bothering him? She almost laughed, but at the earnest expression on his face, she softened. “Look at our family. Saya is a natural-born Healer. Orin will be the greatest Threadlorist in history. Isak is a Math-mense who will work for a perfectly lovely accounting firm one day. I conjure keys that open doors to anywhere in the world. Papa conjured doors so beautiful people wept when they saw them. And Mama’s enchanted matchmaking sealed many happy couples in the city. We all have magic, and one day you will too.”

“But what if I don’t? What if I’m a useless Untouched?” he asked.

Elia gasped. Where had he heard that term? Likely from some tactless customer in Maisie’s shop. She was not going to let Myron grow up using filthy street slurs.

“We don’t use that word in this house. People who can’t access magic aren’t *untouched* by the gods. And they aren’t useless. Look at Andek. He doesn’t have magic. You could still have a family, a business, and a normal life, just like him.” She paused while he made an aggravated noise. “Whether your magic comes or not, you’ll be just fine. We’ll look out for you either way.”

He smiled reluctantly. “If I get magic, I hope I’m a metal enchanter. I want to make swords!”

She looked to the silent skies for help. “You only say that because you’ve never seen what swords actually do. Now go get ready for bed. I’m sending you back to Maisie’s tomorrow. Her shop will probably be crowded with fancy nobles ready to fight each other for a chance to gobble up her expensive treats.”

Myron laughed and nodded. “She threatens to enchant everything to taste sour when they get too rowdy.”

“Sounds like Maisie. Now go on.”

He hopped off her lap and ran toward the bedroom, stripping off clothes as he went. Mama might have chided him for that. An old pang throbbed in her heart. Mama would never have the chance to see Myron’s magic. She wouldn’t get to know him as he grew up. But still, she would have understood exactly how to comfort him.

It was the dead of night, and someone was screaming. Elia had to fight her way to consciousness. That was Myron's voice. She jumped up and ran to his bed on the other side of the room they shared with Saya. She lit the lantern at his bedside table.

Myron's eyes were rolled back in his head, and his body quivered. A seizure? Elia looked at Saya, who had joined her at Myron's bedside. Saya would know what to do. She placed her fingertips on his forehead and then pulled them back quickly as though he'd burned her.

"He's not ill," she whispered, and took a step back, hand flying to her mouth. "He's—oh, oh no."

Myron began to utter half-formed words. It took Elia a second longer to understand. He was *seeing*. A Fate touch from one of the gods. But that couldn't be right. Myron was only eight. Fates weren't claimed until their teenage years. She hovered close to his mouth, trying to catch the words and determine which god was speaking through him.

Myron sat upright, eyes still rolled back, and grabbed Elia's arm. His grip far exceeded his usual strength. When he spoke, the voice was not his own but an eerie, otherworldly rumble that his little body should not have been able to create.

"You shall meet the bringer of change in deepest night unsealed. The harbinger of the god of death will walk in the valley of the slain. Blood stars rise on the path of his destruction. The light shall be devoured."

Then he released her arm, gave a little moan, and fell back onto his pillow.

This was no message from a god of life or plenty. It was a Fate touch from Morthanos, god of death. A curse if there ever was one.

Elia couldn't catch her breath. This shouldn't be happening to her baby brother. She beckoned to Saya, who hesitantly touched his brow again.

"He's deep asleep now," she said. "A normal sleep."

Elia shoved her fist in her mouth to keep from sobbing. She put an arm around Saya's trembling shoulders and pulled her toward the living room. Orin and Isak stood wide-eyed in the door. She bobbed her head once, indicating for the boys to follow her, drawing them as far from Myron as possible.

"I th-think Myron just became a Fate," Isak whispered, face twisted in shock. "But which kind? I couldn't hear the words."

Elia wiped her eyes. “That was a death fortune. From Morthanos. So that would make Myron a Deathfate.”

They were all silent for a moment. No one wanted their loved one to become a Fate. As the mouthpiece of whichever god they served, Fates were often granted immense magical abilities and insights. But as the gods gave, so they took. For the gift of great magic and divine vision, the gods exacted a steep price. Every prophecy stole a little of the Fate’s life force. Once godstouched, Fates never lived long.

“We should tell the temple priests,” Orin suggested unhelpfully. “Let them sort it out.”

Elia glared at him. “Myron is too young to be carted away to a death temple.”

The death temples were notoriously secretive about their rituals, and while no one really knew how they served Morthanos behind closed doors, none of their priests seemed to have any joy. People went to the death temple to die, to send dead or dying loved ones through the gate to the afterlife, to beg Morthanos for either death or a deferral of death. People made death offerings at the altars and summoned spirits in the sanctuaries. It wasn’t the place for an eight-year-old boy full of life and sunshine.

Saya’s hands quivered as her big brown eyes met Elia’s. “Why is this happening?”

Orin wrapped his lore-woven blanket tightly around him. “It has to be a punishment for what we’ve done to Papa.”

His words cut deep. By keeping Papa fastened to life at death’s gate, rather than allowing him to pass, they were depriving Morthanos, the death god, of his rightful due. Perhaps Morthanos claimed Myron in return. But no.

“Myron has nothing to do with what we’re doing with Papa. He’s just a child. Why punish him?” Elia said in desperation.

Isak dropped into a worn, overstuffed chair by the hearth. “It punishes us all. Taking Myron as a Deathfate hurts our whole family. Each of us has had a hand in keeping Papa alive.”

They looked to where Papa slept by the fire. His chest rose and fell as always. A life for a life was often the way of the gods, but Elia had hoped they wouldn’t notice Papa’s tardiness passing through the gate.

Tears ran freely down Orin’s cheeks. “Wh-What are we going to do?”

It was too soon to let Papa go. They needed time to finish building the savings for their new life, time for Elia to turn nineteen. Then she'd be able to settle this. Somehow.

"Nothing. There's nothing we can do right now. But soon, I'll fix this," she said as soothingly as possible. "When we're ready to release Papa, then I will approach the temple about Myron." She'd never heard of the gods lifting the Fate touch, but gods were nothing if not unpredictable. "I promise I will figure something out. For now, breathe nothing of this to anyone. Not even Rinna-Grivya. If the death temple finds out we know and didn't tell them immediately, who knows what the punishment will be?"

They all nodded. With sinking despair, Elia watched them settle into the same bitter determination as when they'd decided to keep the severity of Papa's illness quiet. They had been burdened with secrets, loss, and lack much too young, and now they saw it as a normal fact of life. Well, she would fix that.

OceanofPDF.com

4

Elia rubbed her forehead, waiting for her morning tea to steep. It needed to be dark black and sugarless after last night. She couldn't get the scene out of her head. Myron's face with his eyes rolled back as he spouted Morthanos's prophecy before passing out. She shuddered. It was too early for this. She'd think of a plan, but first, tea.

The cup was halfway to her mouth when the knocking started. It wasn't even dawn yet. Anyone wanting to book travel could wait until she'd properly woken up. She sipped the fragrant, spicy tea and ignored the insistent thumping on the door.

The noise intensified.

"Gods above and below," she muttered. "Whoever that is better be ready for a verbal lashing." At least she was already dressed.

She thudded down the stairs and peeked out the window. A scholar in plain gray robes. What could a scholar want at this hour? In the silvery predawn shadows, it was impossible to make out a crest, ring, or any visible sign of his library, guild, or patron.

Elia unlocked the door and opened it with a cold, forced smile. "Good morning, Master Scholar." It was better to assume a higher station so as not to risk offense. "It's an early hour for business."

He stepped into the shop. And, oh. He wasn't some random scroll rat. He was the tall scholar from yesterday in the scholars' guild.

And he was even more glorious than she'd remembered. Cheekbones that could cut glass, an angular jawline, warm brown eyes, and roguish curls. A smattering of freckles scattered across his tanned nose. Unusually fit for a scholar. Her throat went suddenly dry. Was the shop always this warm early in the morning?

"Is it?" he asked absently. "Apologies, then."

Just like a scholar to forget about time completely. The quiet susurration of whispering broke the silence.

She glanced back at the stairs and internally groaned. "One moment, please."

Orin and Saya peered inquisitively from the dim staircase, still in their nightclothes. They were probably wondering why she was in the shop instead of making their breakfast. Orin wrinkled his nose in disdain at the scholar's clothing. His robes stopped a few inches from the floor, but somehow the hem was still frayed. The sleeves stopped well before his wrists. Had he borrowed the ensemble from a smaller colleague? Perhaps he belonged to a lesser guild or served a lower noble who skimped on servants' uniforms to cover funding shortages. There was no emblem or colored cording to inform her of his rank, status, or affiliation. She'd have to proceed cautiously, but first . . .

Elia silently gestured for Orin and Saya to go back upstairs. They were perfectly capable of heating their own oatmeal. There was no reason for them to bother her. Saya's lips pursed into a pout, but she tugged Orin, who was shaking his head in disgust at the worn robes. The door snicked softly shut behind them, and Elia let out a breath. She'd satisfy their curiosity later.

When she turned back to the scholar, she gave a false, professional smile. "I assume you've come with a request, Master Scholar?"

He tipped his head toward her and gave her a dazzling grin that made her cheeks flare with heat. "I have. And I'm no master. It's a pleasure to see you again, Conjurista."

So, he remembered her too. His refined accent hinted at a noble heritage. But who gave up a life of luxury to don scholar's robes?

"Likewise. I don't believe I caught your name the other day, sir. Mine is Elia."

"Oh, I know." He beamed at her. "When you opened the Trove of Beleor, that was amazing work. What an exhilarating display of power!" Was he joking? She'd barely done anything, and she certainly hadn't put on a show. He leaned toward her with a conspiratorial glint in his eyes. "I am quite certain that many of those scholars are still trading whatever fragments from the trove they managed to squirrel away before their master showed up. They ought to send you a gift basket."

Elia laughed. "I prefer their gold. Are you not a member of that guild, then?"

"No, I just happened to be there for research, and I joined the group in the foyer out of curiosity." He paused, rubbing his jaw. "Not all scholars are

like Salvius's little group. They're boys who heard rumors of an interesting, scandalous trove and went after it like puppies after a treat."

Elia laughed. "They did look a bit like guilty puppies when the master arrived. I hope you didn't get punished with them just because you were there."

"Punished? No." He grimaced. "But I have been politely asked not to return for a while."

"That's good. That you weren't punished, I mean." She wasn't sure what else to say, but she wanted him to keep talking.

The way his whole face lit up while speaking was utterly fascinating. He spoke to her like they were old friends with a shared secret about the trove. Elia didn't even care that he had thoroughly distracted her from her usual morning routine or that her tea had probably gone cold upstairs.

"You asked for my name. It's Trystoferian." He spoke confidently, but she could have sworn there was a hint of nervousness in his voice. "I've come to commission a door."

He licked his lips. And suddenly, they were the most interesting thing in the room. What had he said? Something about a tryst? Naturally. Every librarian and scrollkeeper probably wanted a secret rendezvous with him. Who wouldn't?

Elia nodded at the handsome scholar. Keep it professional. "Certainly. Let me just fetch my ledger."

She pulled the thick leather book from its shelf under the counter, and then waved him to the reception area. She pulled her armchair a little closer to the scholar than was necessary.

Elia settled her pen on a new line. "So, ah—" What was his name again? She glanced up at him, cheeks flaming, and gave him her brightest smile to cover for her faux pas.

"Trystoferian."

Oh, not *tryst*. Trystoferian. Why did that name sound familiar?

"Apologies, and thank you." She wrote his name on a blank line. "Now, tell me where you wish to go."

He fiddled with his rope belt, rubbing the cincture knot between his ink-stained, quill-calloused fingers, and inhaled loudly. "I'm here to request a door to Serratura."

Elia's head whipped up from the book. Her stomach dropped. She must have misheard him. "Excuse me?"

Trystoferian cleared his throat and slowly repeated himself, exaggerating his noble accent. Elia snapped the ledger shut, as though the name might mar the pages if she didn't shield them between the covers quickly enough. A wave of memories crashed over her, and guilt-drenched nausea threatened to bring up the tiny sip of tea she'd had before he arrived.

No one had ever requested a door to Serratura. Most people didn't even know it existed.

"Is something wrong?" His full lips turned down.

Who was he? Elia took in his appearance again, this time focusing less on his attractiveness. Scholars were supposed to devote their lives to study. Some guilds even held ridiculous wedding ceremonies where novice apprentices swore their lives to a library or scrollkeeper. But Trystoferian had none of the traditional hand tattoos that marked such vows. Only an indentation marred the otherwise smooth skin of his middle finger. Perhaps he had a habit of removing his guild ring. Other than a large ink smudge on the tip of his nose, he wore no scholarly adornments. There were no outward signs he belonged anywhere.

How had he even heard about Serratura? Perhaps he'd read about it in an ancient, dusty archive. Maybe he'd seen a reference to Serratura's Great Library. It would be an alluring, near-mythical destination for a scholar.

Too bad for him. Elia was *never* going there again.

"Unfortunately, you'll have to look elsewhere. I don't conjure keys for Serratura." She said it gently but firmly enough that hopefully he wouldn't question her.

But of course, he did. "Why not? After the power you showed at the guild house, I knew you'd be the best person for this job. My research indicates that the floating islands that make up the kingdom are adrift in the skies, wandering in unpredictable patterns. A key Conjuror would have so many factors to consider. Wind currents, last known location, path trajectories . . . But you made unlocking a heavily warded five-hundred-year-old trove look effortless. Someone with that much talent would surely be able to handle this challenge."

"Serratura is closed to outsiders," Elia said tersely.

His brows knit together. "Closed? This is the first I've heard of that." He scratched his chin and looked away. "Must have been a recent development . . ." He gasped as realization struck him. "You've done it, haven't you? You've been before." His eyes were wide, mouth opened in

surprise. “I’ve never met anyone who’s done it successfully. If you know how to do it, then why won’t you take me? I could slip in unseen. I know how to blend in.” He gestured proudly down at his frayed, unadorned robes as if they hadn’t raised questions about his identity.

Serratura had once been Elia’s haven, a second home of sorts. But she’d ruined that with her hubris and pride. Just thinking about it made her stomach turn. But her personal history was none of this stranger’s business. Given how insular and inaccessible the kingdom was, local Serraturans would recognize an outsider in a heartbeat. It was a risk she simply couldn’t afford.

Elia’s jaw clenched. “My reasons are my own, but my policy is inviolable.”

A look of such wretched dejectedness crossed his face that Elia started. He wanted to travel, and she really needed the gold from a commission. Maybe she could convince him to go somewhere else. Anywhere else.

“Listen,” she said consolingly, shifting to a customer service smile. “There are other wonderful destinations in the world. Places full of beauty and scholarly interest. Edmar is nice this time of year. The harbor festival is coming up. Why don’t you go there? There’s also the historic ruins of Meridia and Lost Kalan. I could show you some location renderings. Or are you trying to impress someone with an interesting voyage, perhaps a lover? I’m sure they’d prefer your company over a specific location.”

Trystoferian coughed as a coppery blush crept over his cheeks. How endearing. It was so difficult not to stare at the adorable ink smudge on his nose. She could still salvage this appointment.

He twisted his robes and hunched over. “N-No. No. Nothing like that. I don’t have a, uh, I mean, I’m going alone.”

As he stood abruptly, more color reddened his cheeks, and he paced in front of the hearth. So, the attractive scholar was single. Not that it mattered, she firmly reminded herself. The important point was that his interest in Serratura was wholly scholarly, and, with any luck, she could entice him with the academic appeal of other locations and gain a contract out of this yet.

He turned to her and let out a breath. “I don’t want to go anywhere else. Just Serratura. I *need* to go there.”

How disappointing. She hated to turn away a customer, but there was nothing under the heavens that could convince her to conjure Serratura’s

key.

“As I said a moment ago, I will *not* open the path to Serratura. They’re closed to outsiders for a reason.”

Never mind that *she* was the reason. He didn’t need to know that.

Trystoferian stood and made an aggravated noise, thrusting his right hand deep into his dark brown curls. He snapped his fingers. “I never gave you my surname.”

Odd. Scholars relinquished their surnames when they joined a noble house, order, guild, or library service. Why would his family of origin matter?

“You did not, but whatever it is will not change my mind.”

His nervousness evaporated, and he gave an arrogant grin, exposing a dimple in his right cheek. Her heart skipped. Good gods, he could have asked her for anything else with that smile. Anything but Serratura.

“It’s Lightdragon.”

Impossible. She laughed. “Sure it is.” He had an ink-smudged nose, ill-fitting robes, a library smell, and he seemed inexplicably nervous. There was no way he was royalty. “What do your servants and subjects call you? Prince Smudge?”

At his confused look, she tapped her nose in the same spot where his was marked. He wiped it on his sleeve, only smearing the ink further across his face and staining his robe.

“I *am* a Lightdragon. Trystoferian Alexios Magnus Felipe Lightdragon, Ninth Prince of Isalindra, Duke of Valdan, Lord of Umbreck Estate.” He paused. “Trys to my friends.”

He fished a signet ring out of his pocket. The sides were encrusted with fire opals and diamonds that glittered under her shop chandelier. The lightdragon coiled around the signet in the center of the ring as if smothering a horde. The ring perfectly fit the indention on his middle finger. There was no mistaking it. Runa save her; she had just insulted a royal. Elia pulled in a deep breath. Every muscle in her back tensed. How could this bedraggled, musty scholar be a royal prince?!

Elia immediately set the ledger aside, rose from her chair, and curtsied. “Forgive me, Your Highness. I didn’t recognize you.” She kept her eyes downcast.

Trystoferian Lightdragon. Ninth prince to the throne. Nephew of King Viktor Lightdragon. That was why his name was familiar. The king had five

sons and three living brothers, all of whom held positions of prestige across the enormous kingdom of Valdan, some in the capital city of Isalindra, some in other regions, and some in the king's army. Though the chances of his ascension to the throne were almost nonexistent, only eight royals in the kingdom were more powerful than he was.

"Oh." He shifted nervously. "Well, I don't generally announce myself while wearing a scholar's robe. I wear this disguise so I can do my research in peace. I told you I know how to blend in," he finished triumphantly.

"Yes, Your Highness." If formality made him uncomfortable, she'd pour it on. A royal who wanted to go to Serratura could cause an international incident. All the more reason to say no.

She had not met his eyes again or risen from her curtsy, head slightly lowered in deference. He tapped his foot impatiently. "Um, as you were." He didn't seem sure of the appropriate response to an extended curtsy. Elia stood, hands clasped at her waist. "Well, will you do it now?" He gave a self-assured smirk. "Will you make my door to Serratura?"

Not a chance. "Your Highness, my policy stands."

His jaw tightened in what must have been an unfamiliar expression of disappointment. How many people had ever dared to tell him no? "And if I command you to do it?"

"You may recall, Your Highness, that the law forbids even kings from commanding artisans to conjure, create, enchant, ensorcell, or perform any other act of magic by force."

His shoulders slumped. "You're right."

Elia kept her chin high as she returned to the counter. Prince Smudge was not going to see anything other than a competent, professional shopkeeper. Definitely not a nervous eighteen-year-old with secrets and hidden sins. She slid the ledger back into place on its shelf and smoothed her skirt. If his patronage was reserved exclusively for a trip to Serratura, this meeting was over.

Seeing that she was silently hinting at the end of their business, he gritted his teeth and said, "I'll have to find another way to persuade you, then."

"I am resolute in this." She walked to the door. "There is nothing in the world that would convince me to do it."

"Why?" He hadn't followed her to the door.

The tone of his question seemed to be curious rather than demanding. Perhaps if she gave him enough of a reason—without outright lying—he'd leave.

"As I said, it's a closed country. The risk is too great. I am the sole proprietor of this shop. My mother is dead, and my father is gravely ill. I have four younger siblings to feed and care for. Making a door to Serratura would jeopardize five lives other than my own. They'd end up on the street if I'm caught and imprisoned there."

His head tilted in confusion. "Why would *you* be imprisoned? Just open the door to the Great Library, and I'll slip in and out. No one will even know I was there."

Why couldn't Prince Smudge just respect her position and let it go? Her cheeks burned with rising anger. Through gritted teeth, she replied, "Perhaps you don't mean to give offense by questioning my every assertion, Your Highness. But let me assure you that your inquiries and insistence do nothing to erode my stance on the matter."

If he were any other customer, she'd call a peacekeeper to escort him from the shop and ban him from returning. But with royalty, she had to tread carefully. She must have looked formidable all the same because his lips parted and he stepped back from her in alarm.

"I—I meant no disrespect," he stammered.

She narrowed her eyes. "As you say, Highness."

The prince's eyes darted to the exit. "I suppose I shouldn't keep you from your work any longer." He retreated to the door with a hesitant backward glance.

"Do visit again should another destination interest you . . . *Your Highness*," she said coolly.

"Yes, Conjurista. Thank you for your time."

The door chime jingled as he stepped out into the street. As soon as he had rounded the corner heading away from her shop, she slumped against the counter. She had just denied service to a prince. Great.

There was a time when she would have gladly made his door to Serratura, and charged him an exorbitant fee for it too. She would have relished displaying her power. But now, well, she could hardly make a door to a closed kingdom where she'd been banished—deservedly—on pain of death.

An hour later, the sun had crept over the roofs of the shops and townhouses lining the street, and Elia set out with Myron. He trudged behind her, rubbing at his eyes and yawning.

“Why do I always have to stay with the Leonins?” he whined when they were almost to the bakery. “Can’t I help in *our* shop?”

Elia shook her head. “Because Andek and Maisie are very dear friends who have been helpful to us when we needed it. And now they need a little bit of help around the bakery. You know how popular Maisie’s enchanted treats are. She’s very busy, and you are such a good helper.”

Myron was always more compliant when he thought he was there to help instead of the other way around. And it wasn’t a lie. Maisie was one of the most talented Sweet-weavers in Isalindra. Her magical confections were highly sought after. She probably could use Myron’s help, even if it was simple work like washing dishes and sweeping. Hopefully, it would keep Myron’s mind too busy to fret over any effects he may still be feeling from the prophecy.

Elia wondered if she should tell Maisie about last night. What if Morthanos spoke through Myron during the business day and he cast the death of a customer? Or worse yet, what if he cast the death of Maisie and Andek themselves? Elia could only hope Morthanos would leave Myron alone until she could sort things out with the death temple.

The mouthwatering smell of enchanted bread and cake embraced Elia as she entered the bakery. Maisie looked up from sculpting a sugar violet and gave a weary smile. Her auburn ringlets were pinned under a bright pink headscarf, and she already had a flour smudge on her cheek.

“There’s my favorite assistant,” she said warmly to Myron. “I hope you’re ready to work. I have a great big bowl of cake batter that needs to be stirred before I can enchant it. Want to help?”

Myron grinned and jogged to the kitchen to wash his hands and put on an apron. Maisie’s brows gathered as she watched him go.

A moment later, Andek’s teasing voice drifted out from the kitchen as he greeted Myron. “My little buddy! You ready for another big day of batter and suds?”

“Is Myron feeling okay today?” Maisie asked, her voice full of concern. “He has dark circles under his eyes.”

“Nightmares.” Elia hesitated. The words were on the tip of her tongue. *Myron was touched by Morthanos last night. He’s a Deathfate now. Also, a*

stupidly handsome prince wants a door to Serratura of all places. I had to say no to a royal*!* She was so used to spilling everything to her friend, but a glimpse of Maisie's own dark circles made her hesitate. "How are you?"

Maisie groaned and bent over the cupcake tray, adding piping leaves beside the flowers. "Commissions for the Nalani festival are killing me." The global festival honoring the goddess of love, fertility, and family was a time of gift giving, romance, feasting, and dancing. A busy time for confectioners, jewelers, and restaurateurs. "I was up all night enchanting truffles and tartlets. I didn't know this level of tired was even possible." She paused to smile and passed Myron the bowl of batter. "Myron's help is going to be a lifesaver."

"There's not much for him to do in a voyage shop except annoy his siblings and prank the customers," Elia quipped. "Always glad to loan him to you."

A group of giggling teenage girls in expensive, fashionable dresses piled into the bakery and immediately started asking questions about various pastries and cupcakes. Elia waved goodbye and left. It was for the best that she hadn't confided in Maisie. She didn't need one more worry.

As Elia approached the travel shop, she glanced down the alley across the street. A hooded figure in midnight-black robes slashed with sections of rippling scarlet lurked in the shadows, leaning against the wall. The person didn't move or speak but just stood there watching the shop. As she passed, Elia thought she saw a flash of white under the hood. She shivered and hurried inside.

OceanofPDF.com

5

Later, Elia was locking away her ledger, about to close the shop for the day, when the bell chimed. She straightened her apron, curving her lips into a well-practiced, professional smile. When she glanced up, however, her heart fell through the floor. The same hooded figure she'd seen earlier entered her shop. The person was tall and broad shouldered and hovered intimidatingly just inside the door. Their fine robes alone would have been enough to mark their identity, but the bone mask confirmed the terrifying truth. Gods above and below have mercy. This person was a Collector Priest for Morthanos. Every death temple had at least one priest whose job it was to bring Morthanos his due. Whether it was finding new Fates as they received their godstouches, initiating acolytes, gathering tithes, or leading passages for the dead, Collector Priests were imbued with great magical power and acted with nearly complete legal and religious impunity. In short, they got whatever they wanted, by whatever means necessary.

But unlike other Collector Priests she'd seen, the collar of this priest's robes was embellished with silver embroidery and studded with diamonds and rubies that sparkled in the late afternoon sunlight. This one must have held a special position of honor to flaunt that much wealth. The priest strode across the shop and towered over the counter, arms crossed over their chest. There were stories of what happened when Morthanos's Collector Priests were angered, and none of them ended happily. She had to mollify them, whatever it took. Elia ran around the counter and dropped to her knees. Her light blue dress ballooned around her, contrasting with their black train like a moonlit cloud in the dead of night.

Slate-gray eyes studied her through the three-faced mask of bone all death priests wore. The Trihelion. A representation of the life of all that had been, all that was, and all that ever would be until the sun died and the world was extinguished. A priest's mission was indicated by which face of the Trihelion they selected. For any dealings with Fates, prophecies, or vows of future service to Morthanos, they wore the face of the future. For a death or a collection of a debt, they wore the face of the past. For a life or

an arrangement for the living, they wore the face of the present. This priest's harsh eyes sized her up through the face of the present.

"I am Baestran," he said in a deep voice heavy with authority and importance, "Collector Priest from the temple of the Almighty Morthanos, Keeper of the Gate, Lord of the Realm of the Dead, King of Death. Do you know why I'm here, eldest daughter of Carrick Tallis?"

Elia trembled at the sound of Papa's name in the deep, thundering tone of the Collector Priest. But she cleared her throat and found her courage. "I would never presume to know the business of a god or his servants, Honored One."

He pointed toward her reception area, and the long, pointed sleeve on his outstretched arm cast a curtain between her and the window.

"Let's sit and discuss why Morthanos sent me to you."

She rose and followed him to the reception chairs. "May I offer you tea, Honored One?"

"No." He removed the mask.

A shockingly young face peered at her, one eyebrow raised as though he'd guessed that she'd expected a wizened old man. But he was in his early twenties, twenty-five at most. His long dark hair was tied back at the nape, and a tightly trimmed beard accentuated his severity.

Elia nodded and tried not to stammer. "As you say, Honored One."

She waited for him to make his purpose known. And when he said nothing, she ventured, "What brings one so esteemed as you into my humble shop?"

After a moment, he finally said, "If I asked to speak to Carrick Tallis, what lies would you utter to make me go away?"

Elia swallowed. "No lies, Honored One. My father is too ill to entertain guests and has left the shop in my care."

"And yet, that is not the whole truth either, is it?" Baestran cocked his head. "Your father clings to life by a thread. A magical thread of your making. He should have passed the gate long ago, but you held him here. Why?"

Elia's mouth went dry. It had been so long since she and Grivya had given Papa that first dose of elixir. Since they detained his fading spirit. But because the death temple hadn't sent anyone, she'd thought they didn't know. Perhaps they'd just been waiting for an opportune moment to stake their claim.

“For my siblings,” she croaked. “I need to take care of them. I can’t take ownership of the shop until I’m of age. And Papa has a great deal of debt. So I’ve had to continue taking commissions.”

Baestran’s mouth turned down in disgust. “That’s the reason you’ve detained him? To siphon your own father’s magic instead of sending him to his rest? This is worse than I thought.” He paused, studying her. “I’ve come to fulfill my duty as a Collector Priest.”

Elia gulped back rising bile. “Please don’t take Papa.” Her voice broke as she tried not to cry. “I swear, I’ll send him to the temple for his passage as soon as I can. Just let me have him a little longer.”

“You’ve already withheld him from the gate for over a year. Why should Morthanos be denied any longer?”

“In just two months, I’ll be a legal adult, able to provide for my family on my own. Please. You’ve already waited so long. What is such a short time to an immortal god?” If he took Papa, it would doom her whole family and ruin her carefully laid plans.

Baestran glanced back toward the shop counter, hands relaxed, and his fingers drummed the armrests, rings clinking against each other.

“Perhaps for a tithe,” he said, nodding to himself. “A down payment of sorts.”

“What would Morthanos accept in exchange for more time with Papa?” Elia looked at the floor and cursed inwardly.

“Twenty thousand in gold for two more months. Ten for each month.” His fingers were tented in front of his mouth, which was curved in a taunting smile.

Elia’s heart seized. Her savings would be decimated. That money was supposed to be used to hire a matchmaker, to help set her siblings on their paths. They wouldn’t even last the week with the remainder if she paid the priest.

But the bargain would buy her the time she needed with Papa. As long as she had him, she could accept door commissions, which provided the vast majority of the income they desperately needed for the next couple of months.

Elia took a deep breath and tried to steady herself as she stood. She hid her hands in her skirt pockets so he couldn’t see them shaking.

“Very well.” She managed to keep her voice from trembling.

His smile turned sinister and victorious. “It’s a bargain. We’ll seal it in blood.”

Baestran held out a small oathstone, similar to the one Rinna-Grivya used to seal arrangements. Then he extended an ornate knife with a filigreed silver handle dotted with sparkling rubies. The tip pointed up to the ceiling as Baestran looked at her expectantly.

Elia considered her oath before pricking her finger. The magic would hold her to the exact wording, so it was important to be precise. Breaking a blood oath meant exsanguination. When she’d formulated a vow that had no weaknesses, she pressed her finger on the tip of his knife.

As her blood dripped into the oathstone, she spoke the binding words. “I, Elia Tallis, swear to give Baestran, Collector Priest of Morthanos, twenty thousand gold coins in exchange for my father, Carrick Tallis, to remain at home unharmed, unbothered, and left alone by anyone from the temple of Morthanos or his representatives or agents for two months. No harm shall come to Carrick Tallis while he remains at home, and at the end of two months, his peaceful passage will be arranged with Baestran. This I swear by blood and breath.”

The stone drank her blood greedily as she waited for Baestran to fulfill his part. He nodded at her words and pricked his own finger.

“I, Baestran, Collector Priest of Morthanos, swear to abide by these terms. In exchange for the agreed-upon gold, Carrick Tallis will remain in his current state for two months and not one sunrise more. This I swear by blood and breath.”

Elia’s shoulders sagged as relief coursed through her. Papa was safe. The priest could do nothing against him for the next two months without risking exsanguination. Rinna-Grivya always emphasized that oath magic was extremely old and unbreakable. And oddly literal. She trudged to the counter to fulfill her part of the vow. She had no interest in losing all her blood today.

“Your vow was impressive.” Baestran followed her to the counter, a cocky swagger in his step. Of course he was feeling smug. He just became twenty thousand gold coins richer. “You speak like someone who was trained by a witch.”

She shrugged as she rolled away the rug covering the secret compartment in her floor. “Because I *was* trained by a witch. At least where blood oaths are concerned.”

“Fascinating,” he said absently. “In any case, as far as I’m concerned, our business will be concluded when you hand over the gold and your brother. For now. I’ll return in two months for Carrick.”

The world tilted under her, and Elia would have staggered to the floor if she wasn’t already kneeling. She had to have misheard. “Wh-What? My brother?”

“When death called, you refused to relinquish your father,” Baestran said accusingly as he slid the bone mask back onto his face. “You had months to rectify the situation or bring your case before the priests, but you did not. So now, Morthanos has taken your brother as payment. Our diviners saw his gifting. Your brother will now walk the path of a Deathfate, dedicated to Morthanos.”

The priest’s mask now displayed the face of the future. Her mouth flooded with saliva as her stomach roiled. She was going to be sick all over her shop floor. This couldn’t be happening.

Elia stood and stared at Baestran in horror. “But Myron is so young. Only eight years old.”

“You snatched your father’s soul from Morthanos’s very hand.” The ominous mask glinted as Baestran’s head angled to the side. “Did you think he’d never collect? Perhaps the boy is several years younger than most new Deathfates, but Morthanos’s will is absolute. Your brother will pay the price for your actions. In two months, your father will go through the gate at last. But you *will* relinquish the newly gifted Deathfate to me. Now.”

Elia was shaking her head before she could think better of it. “You can’t take Myron. He still needs me. He can’t go to the temple with you.”

Baestran crossed his arms, his ornate sleeves rippling with the motion. “He was gifted as a Deathfate. He must come with me. His training and service to Morthanos begin tonight.”

The thought of sweet Myron in a death temple. He would be subjected to unimaginable horrors in the mortal house of the god of death. All too quickly, drained by Morthanos’s penchant for frequent prophesying, Deathfates became husks of people and died, wrung out and exhausted. The thought of that happening to Myron made her queasy all over again.

She was about to argue with Baestran, but apparently Runa had it out for her today. Because it was at that unfortunate moment that Maisie sauntered in with Myron in tow. She was laughing at something he’d said. His shy smile and sweet laugh shattered Elia’s heart anew.

“Hello, hello,” Maisie called brightly as the bell over the door chimed. A covered basket dangled from her arm, and the travel shop filled with the intoxicating scent of warm bread.

“Oh.” Maisie froze just inside the door, eyes wide as she simultaneously curtsied and shoved Myron behind her. “Um, greetings, Honored One. It seems our return was ill-timed.” She flashed a panicked glance at Elia. “We’ll head back out for a bit and fetch some dinner to go with this bread. Come, Myron.”

Baestran removed the bone mask and spoke before Maisie could even reach for the door. “Ah, Maisie Leonin, most beloved Sweet-weaver in Isalindra. Please stay.” He smiled at her. The toothy grin of a predator about to strike. “Your timing was actually quite fortunate.” He turned back to Elia. “Now all I need is the gold, Conjurista.”

“Elia?” Myron said uncertainly. “What’s happening?”

Baestran turned to Myron, who was peeking out from behind the swell of Maisie’s skirts. “Greetings, young Fate. I am Baestran, a priest of Morthanos. Do you know who Morthanos is?” A small nod from Myron. “Yes, I know you do. You’ve heard his voice in your dreams. Seen his visions in your mind. Have you not?” Another small nod. Baestran took a few steps to Myron and bent until they were eye to eye. “At the temple where I live, we serve Morthanos and worship him. There are others like you there, and some with other godstouch magic from Morthanos. I’m here to bring you to the temple so you can live with us and learn to use your gift. And you will tell us all Morthanos speaks to you.”

“I—I thought th-those were nightmares.” Myron cowered even farther behind Maisie, grasping fistfuls of her skirt as if that could save him from the Collector Priest.

Baestran shook his head. “No, little Fate. That was the voice of your new master. Come, take my hand.”

“I don’t think so,” Maisie snapped. Elia wasn’t sure she’d ever heard her friend take that tone. But she was like another big sister to Myron. “You can’t take a child from his home just because you declare him to be a Fate. And whoever heard of an eight-year-old Fate anyway?” Then Maisie must have remembered who she was talking to because she lowered her head deferentially and mellowed her tone. “Honored One, there must be some mistake.”

Elia stepped around the counter, the heavy wooden chest in her shaking hands. The weight of all her work—the weight of her family's future—was in that box, slowing her heavy march toward the priest. She held her breath as she handed him the bribe. She tamped down her tears as anger and hatred swept over her. Baestran opened the box and glanced inside.

"You have my blood oath," she gritted out. "You have my gold. Honored One, please leave my brother until he is of age to begin his training. He should stay with his family."

The corners of his mouth lifted slightly, as if he was amused by her rage. "Myron's presence is vital to the temple. Morthanos calls to us through him. Come, child." He extended a hand, but Myron stared at it unmoving.

"He's not going anywhere without the permission of his guardians, Honored One," Maisie said in the coldest tone she'd ever heard her sweet friend take. "And we absolutely do *not* give it. Who is your superior? I demand official temple documentation requesting guardianship of Myron, and I will show it to the family solicitor while we consider your claim."

Maisie was only a little older than Elia, but she'd been running a successful family business for years. She had a network of clients and business contacts throughout Isalindra. And she was legally an adult. Baestran couldn't just walk all over her. Elia held her breath.

But Baestran only pulled a leather-bound scroll from his robes and handed it to Maisie. "Signed by the Archpriest himself this morning. If you attempt to prevent me from taking him, Sweet-weaver, I am authorized to use my power as Morthanos's chosen servant to take our new Fate. It could mean an early passage for you, regardless of your popularity."

Maisie popped the seal and unrolled it. Her face drained of color as she scanned the contents. "Elia, this is bad," she murmured, and shook her head. "It grants him complete legal custody of Myron. It's official."

Baestran grabbed Myron's arm, causing him to cry out. "It's not so bad at the temple, young Fate. You'll be treated well."

Tears began streaming down Myron's cheeks and he screamed. "No! I'm not going anywhere with you. Elia, get him off me. Elia!"

Elia took a step toward them, but a sudden snap of the priest's magic held her in place, wrapping around her legs like a vise. She groaned as the magic constricted with her every attempt to move. It was a display of what he could do. Of what Morthanos would both sanction and support.

“Elia!” Myron wept again.

Her gaze snapped to Baestran. “Let me go, Honored One,” she said between clenched teeth.

Baestran studied Elia for a moment and raised an eyebrow. “Very well. But behave.”

The moment his power released her, Elia rushed to Myron and threw her arms around him, severing the priest’s grasp on her brother. Baestran snarled and raised a heavily ringed hand.

“Elia, be careful.” Maisie stepped between them. “He could kill you, and no one would bat an eye.”

Elia’s breaths came in gusting heaves as she fought to master her panic. She couldn’t win against Baestran. Not in this moment. Myron needed her to be strong and clever, not a violent whirlwind that invited further punishment from Morthanos. She let go of her brother but did not retreat as the priest grabbed his arm again.

Maisie glared at Baestran. “We *are* going to contest this. Expect to hear from our solicitors.”

Elia released a long breath and took Myron’s hands, ignoring Baestran’s glare. She forced her gaze to soften, even as she barely kept a tether on her control. Then she gave her brother the words he needed to face this.

“Listen, my sweet. Look into my eyes so I know you hear me.” Myron lifted his watery eyes to hers. “I know this is scary. But we are going to fight to bring you home. And one of us will check on you every day until then. If anyone in that temple steps out of line with you, if anyone lays a hand on you or mistreats you in the slightest, we will bring down divine fire on them. But until we get you back, I need you to be brave.” She drew Myron close again into a tight embrace. “You are going to have to be braver than you’ve ever been. When it gets hard and you’re scared, remember that all of us love you and are fighting to bring you home. Endure it until we have you back. Be brave until you come home again.”

As Elia released him, Maisie pulled his head against her chest and held him, ignoring Baestran’s continued grip. “We won’t let them keep you. Even on your worst days, remember that we are fighting for you.”

Though Maisie’s voice didn’t waver, Elia didn’t miss the stiffness in her posture and the slight tremble of her auburn ringlets. When she withdrew, Myron’s eyes were glossy, but he stood with his shoulders back and head high.

“I hope you heard all of that, Honored One,” Maisie said, biting out his title like a curse. “Myron isn’t some lost little orphan you can just take without consequence.”

Baestran’s eyebrows raised. “Isn’t he, though? Where is Carrick?” He sneered at Elia. “Oh, that’s right. For the next two months, he’ll be clinging to the last scraps of his life. Unable to help anyone.”

“Regardless of where his parents are,” Elia cut in, “I won’t rest until my brother is back.”

Baestran shrugged and dragged Myron to the door. “Take it up with Morthanos. If you dare.”

He pulled the bone mask back into place as he hauled Myron down the street. Neighbors peeked out of their shop doors and windows, aghast. But Elia didn’t care about the gossip they were surely spreading. Myron was gone. Her savings were gone. Her father was suffering. And there was nothing she could do about any of it. She sank to her knees and wept as Maisie held her tight.

OceanofPDF.com

6

It had been three days since Baestran took Myron away. A sense of heaviness pervaded the house as they went about their daily tasks. Myron's absence had sucked all the joy from their lives, and Elia was plagued with restless desperation to get him back. She had called in every favor ever owed her to find a way to remove Myron's curse, or at least bring him home. Four Healers had told her there was nothing they could do about Myron's condition. Three solicitors had outright laughed at her when she'd tried to convince them to take her case to reclaim Myron from the death temple.

She'd had a letter presented to the royal Healer, but the useless rat had refused to even look at Myron. His reply had been only one line. *There is no medical intervention that can reverse a divine empowerment.* Elia's vision blurred as she slammed her fist down on the counter and crumpled the fancy stationery.

The nights of alternating between lying awake worrying about Myron's well-being and nightmares of what he must be enduring were taking their toll on her. She was told by the temple acolytes that because she wasn't of age, she wasn't allowed to visit her brother, but Maisie had been to see him every day. She reported that his face already appeared sallower and his expression more distant. The acolytes said a certain amount of *withering*, as they'd put it, was normal when Morthanos claimed a Fate.

Most Fates were much older than Myron and would have more stamina to survive the effects of prophesying. Myron was so little. He wouldn't survive this for long.

Grivya had been furious when Elia told her what had happened. The fearsome witch had marched to the death temple doors, but they had refused to see her. She hollered threats and terrified several of their acolytes. But in the end, the temple had kept Myron.

Last night, Maisie had dropped by with fresh bread and a dismal update. She'd been contacting every solicitor, judge, and nobleman with power she'd ever known. None of them had had a solution for their situation.

Maisie’s words had been full of fight and determination, but her eyes had a bleakness that belied the truth. Morthanos had staked his claim on Myron, and there wasn’t much to be done about it. If the death temple wanted him, then at the temple he would stay.

Meanwhile, the family coffers were dangerously low. Locksmithing work had tapered off for the week, and there had been no new door commissions. They’d have to sell something to make this week’s debt payments and buy food. Elia glanced at Orin perched in his window seat, dutifully embroidering an adventure tale, lost in his work. Elia bit her lip and hated herself a little for what she was about to do.

“Come along, Orin. You’re walking with me to the bakery.”

His fingers froze mid-stitch, and Elia’s heart twisted. But still, she selected a shorter finished tale from the basket at his feet. A fairy tale would be eye-catching enough. It wouldn’t fetch as much gold as the whole bolt she’d sold to Count Featherthorn, but hopefully it’d be enough.

“Let’s take this one,” she said gently but firmly.

“Elia, please don’t do this.” His lip quivered.

She wrapped the threadtale around his stiff shoulders like a shawl and embraced him. “We have to buy food. Our debtors will start calling soon if our payments are any later. And parting from your work is something you must learn to accept before you apprentice. This will be good practice for you.”

He whimpered. “Can’t I stay here while you go?”

She released the embrace and kept her tone as soothing as she could. “I can’t leave you alone. Isak hasn’t come back from Rinna-Grivya’s yet, and Saya is at the apothecary getting comfort poultices for Papa with the last of our money. You have to come with me.”

Elia fought the urge to take back her words and find another way. But without a door commission, nothing would bring in the kind of money threadlore would. “I’ll let you pick the buyer.”

Orin released a shaky breath but gave a slow nod. He followed her out the door with plodding steps and a hanging head. They took the long way to the Leonins’ bakery, winding through the most popular fashion district in Isalindra. As they passed aristocratic shops full of enchanted baubles and restaurants with conjuring chefs, Elia mulled over their problem.

Finely dressed attendants lurked inside the high-end Sartorialist shops they passed. Artfully enchanted signs glowed as they advertised the arrival

of the season’s newest styles. Even the never-ending war with Elantika couldn’t stop high fashion. Nobles mourned when soaring rent and the ever-increasing war tax drove their favorite shops out of business, but that didn’t stop them from supporting the other Sartorialists in this district. Orin strode beside Elia. His sour mood dissipated as Sartorialistas and fashionable shoppers marveled at his handiwork and begged Elia to disclose the name of the shop it had come from.

While Elia stopped to chat with a friendly nobleman who inquired after her father, one bold Sartorialista made her move. She practically dragged Orin to the threshold of her shop and rubbed the embroidery between her thumb and forefinger. His neck was flushed scarlet, and he flinched overdramatically. While he loved hearing praise for his work, he hated for anyone to touch it or him without permission, and judging by the look on his face, he was about to say or do something socially damaging. Elia hurriedly excused herself, swept over, and threw her arm around her brother’s tense shoulders, gently guiding him a step away from the Sartorialista.

“Orin, dear, you mustn’t get sidetracked by this lovely shop. We have an appointment to keep.” She gave a polite but restrained smile to the woman. “Good afternoon, Sartorialista. Please excuse us. My brother must have been lured by your clever window display.”

It was an unremarkable display, but Elia hoped the pleasantry would distract the woman.

“I couldn’t help myself,” the Sartorialista said, elongating her vowels so that her response took as much time as possible. “I’ve never seen threadlore with such skill and artistry. And is this Elantikan Compassionate Silk? I haven’t been able to get any in ages.” She gazed almost hungrily at Orin’s shawl. “You said you made this? Young man, my shop is looking for a skilled apprentice like you.” She looked eagerly at Elia. “We should discuss a contract. I only serve the most fashionable, wealthiest members of the nobility. He’d receive some of the best training in the city.”

Orin looked at the woman like she’d just offered him a dead rat. While Elia wanted to respect his feelings on the matter of his apprenticeship—that nowhere but the palace would do—she needed to keep his prospects open. She took the only out she had.

“Mistress, please excuse us,” Elia said before Orin could respond. “My brother is still a minor and won’t be able to apprentice for months. As his

older sister, I couldn't allow him to accept a contract illegally." She looked pointedly around the street to emphasize the public nature of their conversation.

"Unfortunate indeed," the Sartorialista said, her thin lips turning down. "In that case, perhaps I can offer you a tempting price for that shawl."

Elia inclined her head. "Regretfully, my brother rarely parts with his beloved threadlore. But he often displays his work in our shopwindow at Tallis Travels. By the way, if you have good fortune during the Nalani festival, we offer excellent couple's rates to all the most romantic destinations."

Orin gave Elia a grateful smile. She had promised him, after all, that he could pick today's buyer.

"I see," the Sartorialista said in a nasal whine that grated on Elia's nerves. "Perhaps I'll drop in after the festival." Her eyes lingered on the shawl, but she clearly recognized the terms Elia had subtly set: book a vacation if you want to buy threadlore silk. "Well, keep me in mind, boy. When you come of age, there could be a place in my shop for someone with your talent. And we clothe only the best here."

Orin looked past her skeptically. Before he could insult her shop, Elia exclaimed, "What an honor! You are kind to recognize his talent. We really must be going, though. Good day, mistress."

The woman nodded and lit a black clove cigarette at the end of a ridiculously long cigarette holder. "See you in a few months."

Orin visibly cringed at her smug declaration, and Elia quickly turned him toward the Leonins' bakery. Two blocks later, well out of sight of the too-eager Sartorialista, Orin reluctantly sold the shawl to a sweet, fabulously wealthy elderly woman who wanted to wear it to the next royal gala. It had taken a fair bit of coaxing on Elia's part, but the heavy weight of gold in her pocket was a relief. Silent tears rolled down Orin's cheeks as the woman walked away in his shawl, and Elia had to repress a pang of remorse. Orin's sacrifice meant their family's survival.

Their visit to the bakery was brief, as there wasn't much news to share. Myron's state continued to decline within the walls of the death temple. Maisie's legal contacts were reluctant to challenge the temple over a matter as simple and straightforward as Morthanos claiming a new oracle, especially considering the fact that it was a divine punishment. Elia had expected that, but it still stung.

“Don’t start worrying yet,” Maisie had said, layering rows of day-old dinner rolls into a basket. “I still have a few more connections to try.”

When Maisie sent them on their way with a basket brimming with the bakery’s leftovers, Elia felt more resolved than ever to get him back. Somehow.

As she and Orin rounded the corner near home, Elia glanced through their shop’s front windows and froze. Prince Smudge was back. There was no ink on his nose today, but he still wore his shabby scholar disguise. Perhaps he had picked a different destination after all. Given his royal status, she could charge an exorbitant amount of money. Thank Runa, maybe their luck was about to change for the better.

She watched from the street as Prince Trystoferian spoke with Saya, who must have reopened the shop when she returned from the apothecary. He made big hand gestures and funny faces, pacing around as he told his tale. It was unexpectedly endearing. Saya was laughing with her whole body. A belly laugh Elia hadn’t seen from her since before Papa got sick. Her stomach twinged. A girl Saya’s age ought to laugh like that all the time.

“He wears the worst fabrics,” Orin said with a groan, his mood still sour from the loss of his shawl.

Elia’s eyes bulged, and she grabbed his arm. “Mind your tongue. He’s a prince. He could ruin us.”

“Ow!” Orin wrenched his arm away. There was no way her grip had actually hurt him. “Well, why is a prince going around in tattered robes?”

“He’s pretending to be a library scholar so he doesn’t attract attention.”

Orin pursed his lips. “He should at least get some robes that fit.”

“Go on upstairs,” she said as they entered the shop, and Orin went without a backward glance at her. Elia called after him. “If Isak is back, tell him to start dinner. If not, Saya will handle it when she comes up in a moment.”

Prince Trystoferian stopped talking and looked at Elia, his eyes sparkling with whatever delightful tale he must have been spinning for Saya. Behind him, Saya’s smile dropped. Without another word, she left the counter space immediately and headed for the door. She paused with her hand on the knob. After the lecture Elia had given her when Count Featherthorn had visited, she was eager to avoid more trouble.

“Thank you for the stories, *Your Highness*,” Saya said with a little wink.

He gave her a courteous bow. “Thank you for the excellent company, my lady.”

She giggled and bounced up the stairs. After they were gone, Elia curtsied and said, “Welcome back, Your Highness. I hope I can better serve you this time.”

He smiled with that cursed dimpled grin that stole her breath. “I do too, and please, just call me Trys.”

She had to look away and stifle a laugh at his nickname. “Of course, of course.”

Elia set the basket on the counter, and Prince Trystoferian’s eyes flared as he inhaled deeply.

“Are those Leonin’s famous tarts?”

“Made by Maisie herself.” Elia smiled. “Are you a regular there?”

“Sometimes I stop in on my way to the library.” When he was in disguise as a poor scholar. She hoped Maisie had never given him a pity discount. “May I?” He was already reaching for the basket. Never told no.

Elia intercepted his hand with her upturned palm. “For two hundred coppers, you may.”

He stared. “They’re only one hundred at Leonin’s, where they’d be fresh out of the oven.”

Elia gave a wicked smile. “But what luck that *these* tarts are conveniently located right in front of you. By all means, go to her bakery. Maybe she hasn’t run out yet. I’m sure the line of people she always has outside her shop won’t complain at all if you cut to the front.” She leaned over the basket and sniffed, giving a soft hum of appreciation. “They *are* delicious, aren’t they? Best in the city, I always tell her.”

Frowning, Prince Trystoferian reached into his silk coin purse. “That would be terribly inconvenient, as I’ve been waiting to speak with you.” He set a pair of copper hundred-piece coins on her counter, snagged a tart, and jammed it into his mouth. “Mmm.”

He devoured the tart faster than even Isak would have. Elia laughed, pocketed the coins, and retrieved her ledger from behind the counter. He seemed to be in a much more reasonable mood today.

“Tell me where you want to go,” she said warmly.

He wiped his hands on the sides of his robes, leaving smears. Then he swallowed the last of the tart and gave her a satisfied grin.

“I’m here to tell you why I want to go to Serratura.”

Not this again. She snapped the ledger shut. “I already said—”

“I know. Please. Let me explain.” He held up his quill-calloused right hand. “I should be dead.”

Elia’s brows drew together. “What?”

“Just listen. There are a few ways nobility is more restricted than commoners. We can’t escape the king’s war. As you know, commoners can choose to pay the annual war tax for each able-bodied member who does not join the military, or they can voluntarily enlist for a small stipend. But every noble household is required to send one person to serve as an officer or high-ranking leader in the army. We are educated and have been given privileges many commoners are not. My uncle, the king, views this service as a way of repaying that privilege and an appropriate use of our training.”

“I didn’t realize that was why nobles were conscripted as officers.” So far only Elia and Isak were of age to fight, but she had gladly paid every year so they wouldn’t have to throw their lives away on the king’s war, and she’d do it for the others when they were over the conscription age of sixteen. “Who did your family send?”

“It was supposed to be me. But my older brother went in my place. Nikias Aurelian Titus Sebastian Lightdragon, Eighth Prince of Isalindra.” He paused to give a sad smile. “Nik to his friends.”

“What do you mean he went in your place? Don’t nobles start training for their appointed vocations from a young age? How would he have been prepared if you were the one being trained?”

He shook his head. “Nik trained his whole life to take over my father’s estate, but he also participated in military training with me. He was the golden child, gifted at everything he touched. I was never good with weapons, much to my trainers’ chagrin. I lacked the strength, speed, and agility to pass muster. But Nik excelled at all of it, and they hoped I’d learn from his example.” Prince Trystoferian ran a hand through his curls and gave a deep sigh. “I was the second son, the spare, unnecessary. The one who was supposed to be sent to war, not my brother, the heir. When I came of age to be sent to the front, my father’s advisers despaired of my survival. The night before I was supposed to leave, Nik took my place. He never said goodbye to any of us. He just left a letter stating that if he served his four years and returned, my parents wouldn’t have to lose a son, but if I went, they surely would. Nik was that confident of his own talents and my lack. I know he meant to protect me. But his regiment was destroyed by an

Elantikan fire Conjuror on their first day at the front. It should have been me engulfed in those flames. Nik should have been here, safe and learning to manage the estate. Instead, my parents were left with me. A Mense."

He swallowed and looked away. Mensae were usually completely unskilled in sports, combat, or anything that required coordination and prowess. It was one reason Elia always scraped together the gold to pay the war tax for Isak. As a Math-mense, he would never have much athletic skill. Likewise, the prince might have been physically fit due to his father's insistence on training, but he would have never survived a battlefield. And depending on his Mense magic's focus, he might not have skills that would translate well to strategy.

A moment later, he continued. "I didn't see my brother again until his remains were delivered to our estate. After we buried him, my parents never recovered. Mother turned into a ghost of herself. She walked into the wilds and never came back. My father drowned himself in bottles of Critayan ale, and one day, he simply didn't wake from his stupor. My uncle, the king, still sent him through the gate with all the fanfare of a royal passage. But courtiers and nobles, and even my cousins and extended family members, whisper about my parents and brother every time I visit court. It's easier to keep my nose in a scroll than face their pity and judgment. I am alone in the world because of the war."

When had Elia started holding her breath? "I-I'm so sorry for your loss and hardship. I know how difficult it is to lose your parents."

He gave a small nod. "I'm telling you this because I want you to know how important it is to me to end the war. It's the best way to honor my family's memories and to prevent more meaningless death. Because this war is unjust and fueled by greed. Though I'd never dare say that to my uncle, the king."

Elia's fingers interlaced tightly on her lap. "End the war? What does that have to do with Serratura?"

He leaned forward, hands gripping the armrests. "I've been researching for years, looking for a way to end the border war once and for all. I finally found it. But it's in Serratura, unreachable without a powerful Conjuror. After I saw your work for Salvius that day, I knew you could do it. So here I am."

"I see," Elia said slowly. It was an honorable aspiration. But that didn't change the fact she was banished from Serratura. And opening that door

meant more than the risk of being executed if they sent someone back through it to find her. It meant facing the aftermath of what she'd done, and the possibility that she or the prince might inflict further harm. She couldn't be a conduit for any more pain to Serratura.

Elia was on the verge of telling him everything, her whole shameful history, but . . . but what could he possibly understand about it? True, they shared the grief of losing family members. So what? She'd wrecked her haven, ruined countless people's lives, and caused the closure of an entire kingdom's borders.

Elia shook her head. "I don't understand what Serratura has that could stop a war elsewhere. And stop it for good."

"I've spent my entire life in libraries," he said, eyes lit with the passion that came from the joy of magic use. The spark that nothing else could replicate. It made him look so vividly alive, so hopeful and optimistic. Her lips tugged up before she could school her expression, and her heart beat a little faster as she waited for his explanation. If it was tied to Lore-mense magic, it was going to be good. "My magic focuses on history, myth, legends, and all the overlap in those areas that can unveil truth for those willing to look. For the last two years, I've searched for the Scroll of Peace. It's said to permanently end any war named by the wielder. Through months of research, I've discovered it's in Serratura. In the Great Library."

Elia gaped at him and let out a disbelieving laugh. "The mythical Scroll of Peace? Are you joking? It's a bedtime story. No one actually believes it exists, let alone that it could end a war. How would that even work?"

This was his big plan? It was all nonsense and wish fulfillment. Not worth breaking her banishment. He'd be caught and questioned, and a pampered prince like him would break immediately in an interrogation. He'd reveal the location of the door she sent him through, allowing the Serraturans to come through it and drag her back for justice.

Elia held up her hand. "Wait. No, it doesn't matter. As much as I can appreciate your reasoning and I recognize the honor in your cause, my policy stands. I won't make a door to Serratura. You'll have to find another way."

If he wanted anything else, *anything*, she'd bend over backward to give it to him just to see that spark in him again. To see the way the freckles across his nose shifted when he grinned and the way his eyes crinkled at the outside corners. To ease the lingering guilt over his lost family, a grief she

understood so well. But she couldn’t give him this. Better a polite but firm no than hedging and putting him off forever. After such a sad story, hurting him with that kind of polite deception would have been cruel. His face fell and he exhaled.

“You won’t even consider it? After everything I just told you?”

“There is nothing to consider. I won’t do it.”

He stood, crestfallen, and trudged to the door. Just before leaving, he reached into his pocket and withdrew his wallet. He pulled out a small black calling card and left it on her merchandise shelf. “If you change your mind, my contact details are on this card. You can send it to my estate with a note, and I’ll respond.”

Elia gave a tight smile. “It’s highly unlikely, Your Highness. But do come back if you want to go *anywhere* else. Really,” she said as gently as possible, but he didn’t look at her as he left the shop.

OceanofPDF.com

7

Grivya's hope shop door didn't creak when Elia opened it. New oil on the hinges. The usual black piles of indiscernible rot had disappeared from the corners. And the floor had a shine Elia hadn't seen in months. The witch was certainly keeping Isak busy, and *not* with her books. Elia found her brother on a stool, hunched over a tarnished urn with a polishing rag. His clothes were covered in dirt stains, and his face was red and glistening with sweat. He was going to be exhausted and starving by dinner. Elia winced in sympathy. Perhaps she should have picked up lunch for him on her way.

Isak looked up hopefully. "Is it time to come home?"

She grimaced. "It's just past noon. I doubt she'll let you go this early."

Something clattered on a table in the back of the shop. Grivya plunked open a heavy case. "*She* most certainly will not. Elia, what a coincidence! I've just discovered this lovely seventy-two piece set of silver flatware. It was a gift from a pleased customer twenty years ago. I'd forgotten all about it, but now I think I'd like to use it. But it must be polished first."

Isak groaned down at the polishing cloth.

Grivya leaned her elbows on the counter and tented her fingers. "What brings you here today?"

"I've come to ask for your opinion on matters of magic and divinity. Since you're an expert, Rinna-Grivya."

"You're here about Myron. What do you want to know? Come help me sort this silverware while we talk." Grivya patted the counter as if she were offering Elia a treat. Might as well act like it was, given what she was about to ask.

Elia stood across the counter from Grivya and pulled a fork from the tangled pile of every kind of flatware. "I'm worried about him. Maisie says that every day he spends in the temple, he becomes more withdrawn, and he looks ill. He's much too young to be a Fate. Is there a way to lift Morthanos's godstouch?" It had all come out in a breath. Elia gulped.

Grivya set down the spoon and stared hard at Elia. "Send your father through the gate. Let him pass to Morthanos's realm. Then beg forgiveness

at the temple, despite your bargain with the Collector Priest. It's your best chance. You've kept your father fastened to the living world against Morthanos's will for too long, and now he's finally noticed."

"But there's no guarantee in that plan. What if I release Papa, but then Myron remains a Deathfate?"

Grivya picked up a butter knife and inspected it. "It's possible. But as much as we may hate it, that's the price for defying a god."

"It's unacceptable for Morthanos to make Myron a Deathfate as a penalty for *my* wrongdoing. It's not fair to him."

Grivya snorted and went back to sifting through the pile. "Fair? Gods don't have to be fair. Morthanos is the god of death, not justice."

"Isn't there *some* way to break the godstouch? Please, Rinna. You're a hope witch. Don't you have some for me? Maybe you could find a sliver of it if Isak works here a few more days?"

Grivya sighed. "Fine." She opened drawers stuffed with dried herbs, enchanted stones, and other ingredients. Ladling out a scoop of fragrant boiling potion base from her big cauldron into a miniature one, she muttered, "I want Myron to come home just as much as you do, but as far as I can tell, it's impossible."

Elia couldn't let that one slide. "Let's just see what the magic says. I've never seen you send anyone away hopeless."

Grivya smiled softly as she dropped ingredients into the smaller cauldron and stirred. Colorful steam curled over the edges and drifted into the shop. "Of course not. What kind of professional would I be if I did that?" She hovered her hands over the rainbow-tinted fumes and looked back at Elia. "But the hope you wish for may not be the hope you get. Before I start, I want you to know I've already done this once. When you first told me about the godstouch, I tried it for myself. But maybe the magic will say something different for you. I'll need three drops of your blood."

As Grivya started the rhythmic incantation to summon hope, Elia unfastened her brooch pin and pierced her index finger. She approached the little cauldron with blood welling on her fingertip. Elia drew in a deep breath of the floral-and-spice-scented steam as she waited for Grivya to sing her name. Then she pinched her finger until three large crimson drops joined the other ingredients in the cauldron. The steam's rainbow colors faded into a shimmering silver, and Grivya brought the spell to a close.

“Bottoms up,” Grivya said. “Remember, for best results, you have to drink it to the dregs straight from the cauldron.”

Elia cringed a little, trying not to think about the blood she’d have to choke down. Grivya tapped her foot and raised her eyebrow impatiently. The miniature cauldron had magically cooled to a safe temperature for touch and tongue. Elia grabbed it and guzzled the contents as quickly as she could.

“Is it supposed to taste like strawberries? I don’t remember that from last time.” Elia swayed as she turned to Grivya.

The old witch just shrugged. “It’s different every time. Go sit in a chair before you collapse on my spotless floor.”

Elia sank into an armchair as the hope shop faded in and out of her vision. Grivya sat next to her and grasped her hand. Her eyes were glowing silver. “Show me, Elia. Share the magic’s vision with me.”

Everything around her spun, and Elia’s head lolled as the vision manifested. There was a circle of items, each smeared with a bit of blood. Someone sang over the items. Elia couldn’t make out what they were or who the person was.

“An ancient, divine ritual,” Grivya breathed. “So dangerous.”

The vision shifted, and suddenly she was looking at a dimly lit shelf. Some of the scrolls on it were so aged, the parchment was cracked and fraying. A large book sat in the center, faintly illuminated by a hovering light. The scope of the vision widened, revealing that they were in a stone vault. It widened further, and she saw the Great Library of Serratura. Elia trembled and gripped the arm of the chair to ground herself. She was in Isalindra, safe in Grivya’s shop. Not the Great Library.

When the vision finally faded, Grivya released her hand. “Well, that was more informative than when I did it.” She scratched her chin. “It must mean there’s only hope for Myron if *you’re* the one who goes to Serratura and finds the rite to lift a godstouch.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“The vision.” She squinted at Elia as if Elia was being particularly stupid. “That’s what it meant. You saw the ritual happening, and then the vision showed you a vault in the Great Library of Serratura. A scroll or book in that vault must contain the ritual to break a godstouch.” She tossed her head as if to shake off the hope magic. “But it’s too risky. You’d be better off begging Morthanos for a bargain.”

“Because he’s been so understanding thus far,” Elia muttered, following Grivya as she went back to sorting silver cutlery.

“It’s better than running off to a country you’ve been banished from,” Grivya snapped, and picked up the polishing rag. “You have your siblings to consider, the shop to run, and, if you are correct, a limited amount of time before Myron succumbs to the prophetic drain. It would be safer to go to the temple and deal with Morthanos’s priests directly.”

Perhaps if she was very quick, Elia could slip in, get the information she needed, and leave before anyone in Serratura knew she’d been there. Wasn’t Myron worth the risk?

Grivya smacked Elia’s wrist with the flat of a butter knife. “I see you scheming and planning. Cut it out. Just do the right thing and go to the temple.”

Elia needed time to consider this information without a cunning witch nagging her. She looked down at the counter and tried to appear chastened. “Yes, Rinna-Grivya. I’m sorry. I’ll consider everything you’ve said.”

Grivya patted her hand. “Yes, you will. And you’d better make the right choice.”

Elia made a polite excuse to leave and headed to the door. On her way out, Isak raised a brow curiously, but she shook her head. Later. She’d tell him later, after she’d thought and made a decision.

But when she arrived home, a new pile of collection notices in threatening pink envelopes sat in a neat stack on the counter. Pink for *final* notices. Elia swore softly and tore each one open. Her hands trembled as she read them. Each demanded more than the meager money she had available. Each threatened to report her if she didn’t pay immediately. She hung her head. If only that stupid priest hadn’t taken everything.

She pictured Grivya finding her in this state.

Chin up, Elia. It’s not over for you.

“Not yet, Rinna-Grivya, but this will be the end of us.” Elia hiccuped.

You bought two months from that priest. And you remember what I always say about time?

“Time is priceless because anything can happen if you have a little of it. Even the briefest moment can change your fate.”

Exactly. Now what tools do you have to change your fate in two months?

“I still have Papa.”

So, you can make a door.

"I still have my magic."

So, you can make a key.

"I still have Isak, Saya, and Orin."

So, you have labor to barter, a Healer for your father, and textiles to sell.

"It won't be enough. In months and months of our work, all that gold was barely enough to hope for a modest outcome, and now . . ."

Keep thinking, Elia. Don't you have more resources?

"I have this business. The contracts and commissions. And, and—"

Yes, you're almost there. What about those commissions? What about those customers*?*

"I have the request of a prince. He would probably pay dearly to go to Serratura."

Correction. He will *pay dearly to go to Serratura. Charge him extra for the risk. Wring every gold coin you can from him.*

But the banishment. "If I'm caught—"

I'm a hope witch. I deal in chances, not certainty. This is simply a possibility. A chance.

Escorting the prince to Serratura would bring in enough money for her siblings to survive and would give her an opportunity to search for a way to save Myron. She'd be able to afford to take Papa to the death temple and give him the long-overdue peace he deserved. And the banishment . . . well, she'd calculate that risk later.

She scribbled a note on her shop stationery and attached the prince's calling card to it. *Let's discuss your commission request at your earliest convenience*. Hopefully, his royal schedule would allow him to return to the shop before her two months were up. She'd pay a courier to take her message to the prince's estate today, before she could lose her nerve. There was a chance this would end in disaster and death. But there was also a chance this could work.

OceanofPDF.com

8

The sun was starting to sink behind the modest but well-maintained shops and houses on her street when Elia returned from the Leonins' bakery with Isak. Grivya had dismissed him early to take private client appointments. As Isak had prepared Maisie's accounts for the royal audit and she had enchanted cupcakes, Elia told her about the handsome, poorly disguised prince who'd visited her shop twice. With preparations for the upcoming Nalani festival, Maisie had been working long hours, but she still listened attentively as Elia told her about Prince Trystoferian's request to go to Serratura.

"You're not actually entertaining the idea, are you?" Maisie had exclaimed.

"Well—"

"Elia Tallis, if I didn't have sugar all over my hands, I'd pop your head for the foolishness of even considering a trip to Serratura." Maisie's auburn curls glinted in the dimming amber light as she shook her head. "Gods above."

"But Myron—" Elia started again.

"Will be out of that death temple before the year is out. Andek and I are pursuing every contact and every lead we can. We'll get him out."

But Elia knew now how hopeless that path was. If it were as simple as finding the right Law-weaver or appealing to the Archpriest, Grivya's magic would have shown her that. There was no point in arguing with Maisie, though. Elia knew she'd refuse to stop trying.

Isak had been unusually quiet on the walk home. Elia had been about to ask if he was all right when she noticed a small crowd of their neighbors gathered in front of her shop. The finest coach she'd ever seen blocked access to the alley. The surrounding tenants and business owners openly gaped, looking torn between shock, annoyance, and curiosity. Elia's heart leaped. A new commission? Perhaps Count Featherthorn had recommended her work to someone in a higher circle.

Isak's eyes went wide. "Look, Elia. Is that another prince?"

But no. It was not *another* prince. Instead of coming in his usual disguise, Prince Smudge had sent a steward. The man was appareled in full royal regalia. The Lightdragon crest, made of actual lightdragon scales, covered the entire back of his cape and glittered an iridescent silver under the rising half-moon. In the sunlight, it would probably be bright enough to blind anyone who looked at it directly. Typical royal fashion. Who cared if people went blind while accidentally looking at you from the wrong angle? Her neighbors stepped out of the way but kept staring, trying to figure out why a royal steward would visit her.

As she approached, the steward dramatically swept his cape back and gave a half bow. What in the name of every god was this? She stopped in front of the steward and waited for him to speak. He seemed to be doing the same. A moment of awkward silence passed, broken only by the murmuring of curious neighbors.

The steward cleared his throat and said in a deep, rich voice, “Conjurista Elia Tallis, it is my honor to inform you that it pleases Trystoferian Alexios Magnus Felipe Lightdragon, Ninth Prince of Isalindra, Duke of Valdan, Lord of Umbreck Estate, to invite you to his home this evening.”

If blood could ignite, Elia’s face would have been in flames. Several of her neighbors gasped. She could hear them whispering and wondering why on earth a prince would want to see her. She glanced quickly at the window. Orin was there, mouth opening and closing like a fish, today’s threadlore silk dangling loosely in his hand. His eyes were fixed on the steward’s cape, of course.

When she and Papa had gone to royal estates or noble homes in the past, it had always been on foot or in a borrowed horse and cart. No one had ever sent a steward and carriage. The neighbors were still staring and whispering. Time to be brave.

In the clearest voice she could muster, she said, “I am deeply honored by His Highness’s selection of my shop for his commission. And I’m delighted to accept his invitation to discuss the details of his request.”

He inclined his head to her. “Conjurista,” he said, and beckoned her toward the carriage.

Right now? In these clothes? How could she ask him to delay without sounding rude in front of her neighbors? She’d just have to go as she was.

She angled toward Isak and whispered, “Close the shop and help Saya fix dinner. You all go ahead and eat. Make sure they go to bed at a decent time. I’ll be back later.” Then she nudged him toward the shop door.

Isak shuffled past the steward, giving him a wide berth. Elia didn’t move until he turned the shop lights off, locked the door, and drew the curtains in front of Orin’s face. After an amused wave to the closest neighbors, she climbed into the carriage and waited for the steward to join her and explain why Prince Trystoferian had thought making a royal scene in her neighborhood was a good idea.

The steward offered no such explanation. He sat across from Elia, rigid and formal. The carriage rolled slowly through the nobility districts across the river from Isalindra’s center. Lilac and roses scented the air, likely compliments of some Bloom-enchanter whose sole job was keeping the air fragrant. The noses of royals and nobles shouldn’t have to endure the odors of everyday life in the city, naturally. If the steward was curious about why the prince had sent him to retrieve a merchant girl, he didn’t show it.

“Have you been to this district before?” he asked in a flat tone that made it clear he was grasping for etiquette despite the strange situation.

She plastered on a false smile and said, “Only a few times.”

It had been years since she and Papa had come to this district to serve clients who wanted their doors conjured in front of guests. Back then, he could conjure doors from the elements. Ice doors, stone doors, flaming doors. Clients loved the dramatic effects and Papa’s showmanship. When Elia turned twelve, she began working as Papa’s apprentice. By fourteen, she had gained enough control of her key conjuring power to be officially named his assistant, and the pride in his eyes had outshone the stars. He’d commissioned a jeweled key ring as an advancement gift and called her *his key* with a twinkle in his eye. Her gift would have saved them from the crushing debts he’d taken out when Mama was ill. If he himself hadn’t gotten deathly sick.

Elia gripped her plain cotton skirt and tried not to notice the glint of moonlight playing off the steward’s dragonscale cloak. How much was it worth? Orin would know. And the prince had put it on a *servant*. She could probably name any figure under the sun, and he would pay it to go to Serratura.

Perhaps sending the steward had been some kind of royal power move on the prince's part to assert that he had control of this bargain. It wouldn't work. She'd walk away with enough money to fix everything, or he could kiss his dream of going to Serratura goodbye. She spent the awkward silence calculating how much gold to ask for.

Finally, the carriage passed an iron gate with black marble statues posted on either side. Torch-bearing guards saluted the carriage just before the entrance to a long, winding drive. Sugarblossom trees lined the path, their trailing limbs heavy with sweetly fragrant blooms. The drive smelled like a pastry shop. Ridiculous. Did Prince Trystoferian ever have his nose out of his musty books long enough to appreciate it?

The carriage halted at a broad stone stair leading to a sprawling moonstone manor that seemed to glisten with starlight. This place—Umbreck Estate—was outrageously opulent. Footmen held the door open for Elia and she stepped onto a scarlet carpet that had been rolled out from the door. Really? A carpet? Was he worried that her feet would track dirt into the house?

In the grand foyer, passing servants eyed her simple merchant-class attire curiously. Though they said nothing to her, most of them dipped their heads in a polite nod. The steward ushered her down a domed hallway with a ceiling enchanted to look like a summer sky, complete with fat, fluffy clouds that drifted lazily in a phantom breeze. He brought her to a formal dining hall, which flickered in warm gold and scarlet hues under sprawling emberglass chandeliers.

Prince Trystoferian stood at the head of the table, and her mouth went dry. By all the gods, he looked good. Gone was the scholar in musty, frayed robes. Gone were the ink smudges and the scent of old paper and mildew. He wore exquisitely tailored black slacks and a crimson dinner jacket with the Lightdragon crest on his breast pocket. When she stepped toward him, a brilliant smile lit up his face, and her heart fluttered in her chest.

He met her halfway to the table and inclined his head. "Hello, Elia. Welcome to my home. I was thrilled to receive your note and so glad you could come to discuss my request on short notice."

Like she would have said no to a royal steward in front of all her neighbors. But Prince Trystoferian seemed so genuinely pleased. Maybe he hadn't been trying to make a scene. Standing with the erect posture of a court-bred royal, he had the gravitas of someone who was used to being in

full command of a room. The effect was . . . well, it was unexpected. He should stand like this all the time. She inhaled, taking in his intoxicating sandalwood-and-grapefruit scent. When his cheeks started to color as he waited for her response, she realized she'd just been silently staring at him.

She quickly curtsied in response. "Thank you for your hospitality, Your Highness." Why was her voice suddenly so breathy? She needed to get ahold of herself and remember why she'd initiated this meeting. "Before we begin, I want to emphasize that I'm here to discuss the *possibility* of what a commission with you would entail. I have not decided on or agreed to anything yet."

"I understand. This way, please." He nodded at the steward and returned to his seat. The steward pulled the chair out at the head of the table for the prince and then the seat to his right for Elia. The endless table could easily have hosted thirty guests. It was strange to sit in such a large space with just the two of them. She glanced at him and caught him watching her.

"When I was a child, I used to race enchanted horse figurines down the length of it," he said with a playful grin. She could get used to seeing that smile.

"I'm sure that broke all kinds of royal table etiquette." She laughed.

His expression turned rueful. "I never had to be the perfect one. That was Nik."

The brother he'd lost. He was so easygoing that she'd forgotten his reason for seeking her out in the first place. He knew the pain of losing family too. A servant entered with a carafe of dark purple wine and filled their glasses. The prince lifted his. It was a bit premature to toast their success when she hadn't even agreed to work with him. But she wasn't some ill-mannered peasant either. She lifted her glass and waited.

He smiled and said in a resonant voice, "To your handiwork. May the gods never lift their touch from your skills. And to the possibility of our future partnership."

She hesitantly clinked his glass and then took a sip. It was the most exquisite wine she'd ever tasted. The robust flavor of berries coated her tongue, and gentle magic evoked the effervescence of crisp autumn evenings before she swallowed it. "Your Highness—"

"Just Trys, please. I'd prefer to be informal with you."

During this visit he would once again ask for a nearly impossible, almost certainly suicidal contract. It was a bit early for endearing

nicknames. But there was no reason to argue about it either.

She nodded and continued. “Why did you send your steward for me tonight?”

A servant approached with steaming bowls of a pale herb-scented soup. Prince Trystoferian waited until they had the semblance of privacy again before speaking.

“I wanted to talk to you away from the shop. It’s your place of business and your home, and this is a more discreet location to talk in case you decided to make a one-time exception.”

“Right. Because sending a servant clothed in a lightdragon-scale cloak and a royal carriage is discreet. I think every shop owner and neighbor in the vicinity came out to gawk.”

His eyes widened. “My intention was never to embarrass you. I thought sending the carriage was the best way to see you as soon as possible.”

Elia blushed and took a tentative sip from her spoon. She couldn’t help the appreciative sounds she made as she took another bite and another. She glanced at Prince Trystoferian to see if he was enjoying it too. But he was staring at her, mouth slightly parted and face bright red. Maybe she should take it easy on the soup. He shifted in his seat and stared down at his bowl.

They finished their soup in awkward silence that was broken when the servants returned. They set out plates of roasted duck, salted dates, sautéed wintergreens, and saffron rice, and Elia’s mouth watered with the savory fragrance. He gave her a tentative smile.

When they were alone again, he said, “Regarding my request. I can show you evidence that the Scroll of Peace is indeed in Serratura. I was even able to determine its last known location within the Great Library. If I can just get to the city, I’ll manage everything from there. All you need to do is send me there. Just think, Elia, your magic could initiate the end of the war. You’d be saving lives. You’d be a hero.”

Elia hesitated with a bite halfway to her mouth. “Heroes sacrifice themselves for a cause. I can’t afford to do that, Your High—Trys.” She paused at his frown and took a breath. The empty hole under her shop floorboards lurked in her mind. The memory of Myron’s face as Baestran dragged him away haunted her. She wasn’t a hero for some abstract cause, but Elia was willing to risk sacrificing herself for her family. And wasn’t that similar to his own aim? “Even so, I do believe that *your* cause is admirable.”

He took a sip of the rich berry wine and met her gaze, his eyes lighting with that alluring spark. “This is about honoring my family and their legacy. My brother’s sacrifice that saved my own life. It’s about my duty to this kingdom as one of its princes. It’s not just an admirable cause. It’s *everything* to me.”

Before she showed her own hand, what was in his? How prepared was he for travel to Serratura? “I rejected your commission in part because your idea of just showing up on the Great Library’s doorstep is preposterous.”

At his look of affront, she laughed. “Leaving aside legacy and heroism and family honor, let’s talk about simple logistics. Say I make a door to Serratura. Where should it open? Inside the city, where you’ll be recognized as an outsider at once and arrested? Outside the city, where you’ll have to hope no one notices as you walk through town? Do you know local customs well enough to blend in?” He looked like he wanted to interrupt, so she held up a hand. “Even if I made a door directly into the library, even right to the last known location of the scroll, which, before you ask, is not possible, how would you avoid being seen by any of the other scholars in the library? The Serraturans would capture you before you even shut my door. And I promise, you do not want to face their justice unless you can summon wings. They’d drop you off the floating isles without a second thought. Right after interrogating you about how you got there. Then they’d find my door and come after me for letting you in. With all due respect, Your Highness, this plan is idiotic and incomplete.”

He put his fork down and glared at her, eyebrows raised. Clearly, he was unused to being openly questioned. “Why do the Serraturans want to keep their borders closed so badly that they’re willing to risk sending someone through a magical door to a foreign city to capture a rogue Conjurista? What aren’t you telling me?”

The room was suddenly too warm. She’d gotten carried away. The heavy scent of meat and herbs hung thick in the air. She should never have gotten in that cursed carriage. But she had to see this through. They watched each other for a heavy moment, and Elia almost broke and told him everything. But no—until she had his blood oath and a signed commission contract, she had to keep her reasons tight to her chest. He’d never agree to go with her if he knew what she’d done.

“Just trust me. You need a better plan.”

The servants cleared their plates with practiced efficiency, and then they brought mints and ginger puffs as a palate cleanser.

“I’m aware of the dangers,” he finally said, a bit stiffly. “Serratura has been my academic obsession for years. As a Lore-mense, I’m arguably the most knowledgeable expert on Serraturan culture and politics anywhere outside of Serratura itself. Please don’t trouble yourself on my account. A door that opens in a safe location near the library should suffice.”

Naturally, Elia wasn’t “troubled on *his* account.” It was the danger to her own life, and the lives of her siblings, that terrified her.

The servants arrived once more to serve miniature flower-shaped cakes arranged like a garden. She couldn’t help an appreciative gasp. A couple of the servants chuckled as they poured a pale yellow dessert wine into fluted crystal glasses.

He cleared his throat. Right. An irritated prince was still in the room. The servants made themselves scarce once again.

“If I do as you ask and make this door, are you willing to sign a waiver absolving me of fault if you run into trouble of any kind in Serratura?” This was important. Royals were as litigious as they were vapid. Many of them made a hobby of challenging each other in court.

He waved his hand dismissively. “Yes, yes.” He absently picked at a rose cake. “And any other concerns you may have regarding safety can be included in the contract.”

She swallowed a delicious bite of the honey-cinnamon-flavored daffodil cake. “If I agree to it—and I am not saying that I *will* agree to it—I’ll have conditions.”

He gestured with his wine for her to continue. “Name them.”

“First. If I agree, I’ll choose the exact destination point. You’ve never been there, and regardless of what you’ve studied, I’m more familiar with safe locations.”

He nodded and sipped his wine. “Agreed. What else?”

Elia toyed with the charms on her bracelet to keep her hands from shaking at the implications of her next condition. “Because of the danger this commission places me in and because I am the primary caregiver in my family, my contract will be paid in full to my family upon delivery of the door and key. They’ll keep the money regardless of whether or not you come back.”

He rubbed his hand down his jaw. “If I say yes, you’ll agree to the commission?”

Maybe as a prince, he could afford to be carefree with his safety. They might hesitate to hurt him. If she was caught, she’d be killed. If he was caught, he might be reprimanded. Despite what she’d told him, the Serraturans probably wouldn’t hurt a foreign prince, even if he was trespassing. They wouldn’t want to risk causing an international incident.

“That depends.” She shrugged. “We haven’t discussed the compensation.”

He placed his napkin on the table and rose. “Let’s do that somewhere more comfortable. Would you accompany me to the parlor?”

When Elia stood, Prince Trystoferian gently picked up her hand and placed it in the crook of his arm. Her stomach fluttered at the contact. He smiled but said nothing as he guided her to the door and led her deeper into his estate.

OceanofPDF.com

9

On the long walk through an arched corridor, the prince stopped beside various portraits, naming his relatives and telling of their valiant deaths in the never-ending war. Every story ended tragically. Was this supposed to convince her that it was worth him dying on an impossible quest to end a meaningless war and avenge them? It would be a waste of a fine-looking, intelligent man. And for what? A distant mountain gold mine. The ego and treasury of a king.

“My uncle believes that he’s continuing the war in the best interest of the nation. Our treasury would be depleted without access to the mine. But lives are worth so much more than gold. Both kings stopped considering the possibility of a treaty long ago, so the cycle of death will continue with no end in sight.” He sighed. “That’s why the Scroll of Peace is so important. They’ll be forced to stop fighting through its magic.”

“Hmmm” was all she could say.

If anything, this informative tour only served to heighten her sense of remorse for needing to agree to this foolishness. He should keep his pretty face and good intentions safely tucked into a library nook. But she couldn’t afford to refuse him anymore.

When they finally made it to the parlor, he motioned for her to sit on a silk embroidered couch near the hearth. A lutist plucked an innocuous tune in the far corner of the room. A servant approached and handed them fizzing glasses of enchanted water garnished with spiral-cut orange peels.

Prince Trystoferian set his drink aside and turned to face her, cupping her hands in his. Heat rushed to her cheeks as she stared at his hands around hers. They were warm and strong. What would they feel like on her waist, her hips . . . Elia gulped and forced her gaze to meet his. That didn’t help at all. His dark brown eyes were full of passion and pleading. Her breath hitched.

Exhaling, she shoved down every traitorous spark of attraction and distraction. When she met his eyes again, she was Elia Tallis, professional Conjurista, shopkeeper, caregiver to four very dependent siblings. She took

a sip of the enchanted water and prepared to offer a starting point for negotiations. But he began speaking before she had the chance.

“Your siblings. They’re of an age where you’ll seek positions for them soon. The girl I met at the shop—Saya, was it? She said she’s a Healer. You have a brother who does threadlore. Do you plan to arrange formal training for them?” His words were all coming out in a rush, and he stood, pacing across the room.

“Yes,” she said slowly. Where was this going?

“I’m the ninth prince. I have connections at court. I could secure your brother a position with the Royal Sartorialist.”

Was that sweat at his temples? Was a prince actually nervous to negotiate with a Conjurista? Or was he terrified of losing his chance to go to Serratura? Well, this might just play out in her favor. She’d planned to negotiate, but maybe he would negotiate with himself for her.

She gave a light laugh. “That’s kind of you, but Orin is more than capable of securing his own position. Even though he hasn’t been formally trained, his work is matchless. The Royal Sartorialist will salivate when he sees it.”

He stepped toward her. “But the girl, Saya. Surely she wants to attend the Royal Academy of Medicine. For that, she’ll need recommendations. They won’t even consider an application without highly reputable references. One message to their admissions department from me, and she’ll be accepted.”

Elia tapped her chin. She had planned on asking Rinna-Grivya for help with that. But a royal reference would all but guarantee Saya’s acceptance. “That is worth considering.”

“And the older boy. What is his magic?”

“Isak is a Math-mense. He’s no prodigy, but he is particularly gifted at accounting. That said, he has bigger dreams than shoving numbers around a ledger in some dusty shop.”

Prince Trystoferian smacked his fist against his palm. “Right. Yes, of course. I could recommend him to Isalindra University. Any number of programs there would welcome a Math-mense.”

Elia stalled and took another sip of the refreshing citrus water, savoring the sparkle on her tongue. She never had opportunities to indulge in enchanted drinks this exquisite.

“That’s true as well, but my plan was always to take care of my siblings. My nineteenth birthday is in a couple of months. I’ll be marriageable then. Any worthwhile spouse could help me place my siblings in training programs. You’ll have to do better than placements and referral promises.”

“You don’t have any prospects, then?”

What business was that of his? They were here to negotiate a fat sum of gold for a door, not chatter about her marriage prospects like a couple of girlfriends over tea.

She sat straighter and squared her shoulders. “I do not. Not yet.”

Prince Trystoferian was quiet for several moments, staring into the fire. Drawing in a deep breath, he seemed to come to some decision.

His hands trembled a little, and he appeared a bit dizzy as he returned to sit next to her. “Then allow me to make an offer. If you provide the access to Serratura that I’ve requested, I’ll pay you sixty thousand gold marks up front.” He paused for her sharp inhale. It was three times the amount her savings had been before that cursed priest had shown up. “And if I return safely to Isalindra, I’ll offer you my hand.”

The floor fell from beneath her. All the air left her lungs.

“To be clear, you’re proposing—”

“Marriage, yes. To me. Marriage between you and me.” His throat bobbed, and he gripped his glass so hard it was a miracle it didn’t shatter. But his eyes never left hers as he waited for her response.

“But only after you return . . . ?” His words tangled in her mind. What had been his exact offer? Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined an arranged marriage with a noble, let alone a royal.

He let out a laugh. “As an incentive, I suppose. Make sure your door works well enough to get me home safe and sound, and my wealth, my title, and my home are yours to share with me. Move in with your family if you like. Surely that’s worth the risk.”

This couldn’t be real. Why would he go so far for this preposterous obsession? “But you barely know me.”

He held her gaze as he said, “I know you’re beautiful.” Her heart skipped. “I know you’re intensely loyal to your family and those you care about. You’re talented and resourceful enough to maintain a business even though your father is ailing.” He gave her a shy smile. “I probably know you better than any of the noblewomen with politically advantageous

pedigrees who the king wants me to choose. And you know me better than a random tradesperson the matchmaker would set you up with."

"You think I'm beautiful?" Perhaps that shouldn't have been her takeaway from his declaration, but the thought warmed her whole body.

He scoffed. "I'm not blind, Elia. Look, it doesn't matter to me if you think I'm unattractive." She nearly choked at his inaccuracy. "This doesn't have to be romantic. We could have a friendship, a partnership, if that's what you want. The estate is large enough that you and your family could live in privacy if you prefer. Now what is your answer?"

He blinked at her, obviously waiting for some sort of response. Any indication of how his offer was received. But her tongue was heavy in her mouth, and her mind had gone utterly silent.

"Elia, I only want a chance to find the scroll. That's it. That's all you're providing here, my chance. In exchange, I'm offering everything you and your family need to live a stable, happy life. Consider the sixty thousand a down payment on your future. Is that not more than fair?"

The handsome ninth prince of Isalindra had just offered himself to her on a platter. He was a much better prospect than she ever could have hoped for herself. He was kind, intelligent, and loyal to his family in the same way she was. Beyond that, his offer far exceeded any sum she'd considered asking for. Papa could pass through the gate without worry and finally enter peace. The door to Serratura was *her* chance too. She could find the rite to save Myron. Maybe she could get them in and out quickly enough to avoid the consequences of what she'd done. Even if she deserved them.

"I, well, Your Highness—"

"Trys, please." An agitated, closed-mouthed smile pulled his lips into a taut line. "I've just proposed we marry. So please call me by my preferred name."

She could make peace with his nickname for an offer like this. "Trys, I hardly know what to say."

He took her hands again and leaned toward her. His sandalwood-and-grapefruit scent drifted toward her. A current of heat rushed over her whole body. All she had to do was tilt toward him and their noses would touch. "Say yes," he said softly.

Yes to his hands pulling her closer? Yes to his lips on hers? Her breath caught.

Her mouth went dry. "Yes. Agreed. I will make your door to Serratura."

He beamed at her and pulled her into a crushing hug, kissing the top of her head. Her whole body buzzed as he released her.

“Sorry, sorry. I just got carried away. Thank you, Elia. This means so much—”

She held up her hand as his eyebrows rose. “I’m going through the door with you.” He jolted and began to shake his head, but she continued. “I have my own reasons for going, and I won’t hold you responsible for my well-being.”

“Is that your final condition, Conjurista?” He gave a playful smile. As if he hadn’t just given his fortune away.

Perhaps it was the thought of sending Papa through the gate in real peace that reminded her of a warning he’d once given her. *Royals are used to being given the world just for existing. Never accept promises that are not written in binding contracts and never offer your labor without a deposit.* Though it seemed tactless to bring up a contract when the prince was so ecstatic, she would be an idiot not to.

“Yes. And if you are truly serious in this offer, I must ask you to make it official. We must bind it properly in blood on oathstones.” She paused while he nodded his agreement. “And I want to be clear on one thing. If I’m caught by Serraturans, I want to know my family will be cared for. My commission must pass to my siblings upon my death.”

His brows lifted, but he didn’t argue. “Done.”

It wasn’t until she rode alone in the carriage back to her shop that the gravity of what she’d just done descended on her. Would she and Trys survive? Her eyes burned, and she prayed to all the shadow gods that no one would notice her trembling.

OceanofPDF.com

10

Maisie threw up her hand, causing a puff of flour to rise into the warm bakery air. “So you chose to go off and die?” She jostled a pan of biscuits into the oven and slammed the heavy door shut.

“No, I made a deal that will change everything for my family. He’s paying sixty thousand in gold.” Elia didn’t meet Maisie’s eyes. She was already at her threshold for feeling terrible and didn’t need to see the fear and reproach on her friend’s face. “We traded oathstones. Even if I don’t make it back—”

Maisie interrupted with a snort. “You barely made it back last time. And you swore. Elia, you *swore* you’d never go there again. Your family would rather have *you* than money. And so would your friends!”

“Mais, there’s information in the library that could save Myron.”

Maisie held her glowing hands over a tray of her famous tarts. She raised an eyebrow at Elia. “You really think some dusty old scroll in the Serraturan library is going to change Myron’s situation when not a single solicitor, judge, or higher priest will even entertain a query about it?”

Elia stirred cinnamon and inferno pepper flakes into a crystallized honey and egg mixture. “There’s a rite that can break a godstouch. It could free him from being a Deathfate.”

Maisie gasped and threw her floury hand over her lips. “Sweet Runa,” she breathed. “I’ve never heard of such a thing. Are you sure? Enough to risk this mad commission?”

Elia kept her gaze on the bowl as she continued stirring. “Grivya’s hope magic showed me. She’s never been wrong before. That’s why I’m going. I’ll be gone for a couple of days at the most.” She gave Maisie a pleading look. “While I’m gone, can you keep an eye on my brothers and sister? Isak should be able to manage things, but I’d feel better knowing an adult was going to check on them.”

Maisie pursed her lips. “What if Grivya *is* wrong this time, though?”

“It’s still worth the risk. I’ll do anything to free Myron.”

“I don’t know, Elia.” Maisie turned back to the tarts and continued her enchantment. “Maybe you should just wait a little longer. Andek and I haven’t given up yet.”

Elia shook her head. “You’ve seen what this is doing to Myron. Every day he lives as a Deathfate is another horror for him. He doesn’t deserve to live like this because of my choices. I have to at least try.”

The silver enchantment haze over the tarts faded as Maisie lifted her hands. “Of course we’ll look out for the others while you’re gone. I’ll keep visiting Myron at least once a day.” She looked sidelong at Elia. “But you tell that prince if he gets you into the slightest trouble, I’m sending my very muscular carpenter of a husband after him.”

Elia laughed. The thought of gentle Andek hurting anyone was absurd. “I will.” She scraped the sides of the bowl and kept stirring. “Were these mini cakes a commission? Who can possibly afford firespice anymore?”

Maisie shrugged. “Duke Eglantine was the name he gave. Worst pseudonym ever.” She winked at Elia. “With Nalani’s moon rising, everyone wants romance, but no one wants their real name on my ledger.”

Elia sprinkled precious firespice into the mini cake batter. The spice was imported from the Aloran Isles on the far side of Elantika. It was expensive before the war but impossible to get now. “What are you calling these?”

Maisie grinned. “Kiss Me, Bite Me Cakes. Honey and sweet almond paste for the kiss. Firespice and inferno pepper for the bite. And then I’ll give them an endurance enchantment. Nalani’s moon is no fun if lovers tire out too soon.”

Heat rose to Elia’s cheeks. “Where do you think of these salacious ideas?”

“I’m as hot-blooded as the next Isalindran girl.” Maisie winked and moved a tray of delicate white sugar snow puffs to the shaded side of the display case. “You’ll see. It won’t be long before your royal scrollworm *husband* inspires some salacious ideas for you.”

Too late. Elia already had plenty of *quite* salacious thoughts about Trys and his pretty face. Maisie glanced up at her clock. “Good gods, it’s almost eighth bell. Give me your apron and the batter bowl and get out of here. You still have a shop to run.”

Elia handed her apron to Maisie. “Please keep this between us for now.”

Maisie smacked her arm with a wooden spoon. “Like you even need to ask.”

Elia gave her friend a quick embrace and then hurried to the voyage shop. Her trek back down the brick lanes and narrow alleys was much livelier than her predawn trek to the bakery. Street vendors were rolling up the canvas on their carts, yawning and stretching as they prepared for another day of shoppers and passersby. Shops and restaurants opened windows to catch the crisp morning breeze before the odors of the day overwhelmed their businesses. As she walked, she thanked all the gods for friends like the Leonins.

Maisie had been a lifesaver in the days after Elia's banishment, when the twin anchors of grief and guilt threatened to drown her in an ocean of sorrow. Serratura had been her haven until she'd ruined it. She'd left something important there. Some piece of herself that could never be recovered. It was just beyond the horizon of her memory, in a dusky place that teased her dreams and haunted her steps. But Elia could never quite remember what it was.

Three days later, the travel shop door slammed open with a bang, and Elia's heart leaped up her throat. She nearly dropped the feather duster she'd been using to touch up the shelves. Orin squealed and dropped his silks. Trys bent over his knees, gasping for air.

"Sweet Runa, you nearly killed me!" Elia shouted.

At the same time, Orin wailed, "I lost my place in the tale."

And Trys huffed, "We have to go, NOW."

"Gods above and below," Orin exclaimed with a hand over his heart. "What are you wearing?"

Trys turned to Orin and grinned. "Traditional Serraturan garments. I had my tailor design them based on an illustration from a text I discovered some time ago."

"Oh no," Elia said, shaking her head while Orin guffawed. "Just . . . no. You can't wear that to Serratura."

Trys's brows rose. "Why not? It's very accurate to the picture."

"How old was the picture?" She circled him, studying the horrendous attire. "You look like you just stepped out of one of their classical-era paintings. Let me talk to your tailor. Serraturan style is a lot more modern than . . . whatever that is."

"No time." He peered anxiously out the window. "We have to leave as quickly as possible. Right now. They're coming."

“What do you mean? Who’s coming?”

“And if they take me, they’ll bring in anyone with me for questioning. That means you.”

He was more riled than she’d ever seen him. “Trys, slow down. You need to explain what’s happening. We haven’t finished preparations or packed. We can’t just—”

Trys wrung his hands. “Someone told him, Elia. I don’t know who or when. But someone figured out what I was looking for and where I wanted to go, and they told my uncle. He wants me brought in for questioning. I’m sure he thinks I’m trying to undermine his war, and if he understands what the scroll is, he might imprison me for treason.”

Elia was stunned to silence as a dozen questions rose to the surface of her mind. It took her a moment to choose where to start. “The king didn’t approve your travel plans?”

“Of course not.” Trys began to pace around the shop. “He’d never allow a prince of the realm to visit another kingdom without a diplomatic need for it. And he certainly wouldn’t risk allowing me to look for the Scroll of Peace if he thought it’d stop his war, even if he thinks it’s a myth.”

“But would he truly imprison his own nephew?”

Trys frowned and looked away. “He is King of Valdan first before any other title, even familial ones. If he imprisoned me, I would no longer be his nephew. I would be a traitor in his eyes. My lands, titles, wealth, and even my name would be stripped from me. I could be banished or even executed if he ordered it.” He paused and met her gaze, expression turning fierce. “And you, as my collaborator, would share my sentence.”

If he would disinherit the prince, what would the king do to her? If Trys, one of the king’s own family members, risked the possibility of execution, then Elia, a nobody Conjurista without a drop of noble blood, risked the certainty of it.

Furthermore, if the guards entered her shop and discovered all that happened here, Elia’s siblings could be punished as well. Saya could be illegally healing someone at their back door right now. Or, also illegally, giving Papa the elixir that kept him alive. Orin, a minor who could not lawfully work, was obviously selling threadlore in the window. The businesses that kept them fed and housed could be shut down if royal officials realized how much of their funding came from their off-the-books labor. And then there was Papa, who was visibly long overdue for his

passage. There was no point in bribing a Collector Priest only for a royal officer to discover him. In the silence of the shop, Elia could just make out the distant call of a Royal Crier accompanying the soldiers.

“We seek His Royal Highness Trystoferian Alexios Magnus Felipe Lightdragon. Please inform us if you have seen him. Your Highness, if you can hear this summons, please allow us to accompany you to visit His Royal Majesty the King.”

The call was repeated a few seconds later, slightly closer this time. Elia glared at Trys.

“Why did you come here? You know what’s at stake for me. My family could be ruined if the soldiers discovered any number of the things going on in this shop. Why, Trys?”

He recoiled. “I meant no harm to your family. I swear it. But this is my only chance to go to Serratura. To find the scroll and end the war.”

The rhythmic thud of marching boots sounded down the street. Shop doors opened and closed hurriedly. People were stepping onto the sidewalk to get a better look at the show.

“Why shouldn’t I just shove you into the street right in front of the guards?”

Panic flared in his eyes, and Elia could almost see the wheels of his mind turning as he searched for a way to convince her. “You need to go to Serratura, same as I do.”

“I don’t need a rogue prince to get there.”

“But you need the money from my commission, which I will absolutely rescind if you don’t take me to Serratura now.”

She balked at the ultimatum. “Threats don’t suit you, Trys.”

He let out an exasperated groan, grabbed her shoulders, and squeezed. “Elia, please. I’m begging you not to let my uncle take this chance away when I’m so close after all this time.”

Every thought left her head as his eyes bored into hers. A hot current raced up her arms from their point of contact. But she managed to ask, “What if he still locks you up when you return?”

“If we leave now, then they won’t know I was here when the guards came. They won’t know how long we’ve been gone. I can’t get in trouble for something I didn’t know about.”

The murmurs of shopkeepers and onlookers grew louder as the guards approached. The crier bellowed the summons again. Even closer now. She

had only seconds to decide before she'd need to take action. His hands still gripped her shoulders.

They'd already made a blood oath. She could use his help in the library. And why should she take away something he'd worked so hard for? Leave the royal business to the royals.

"Fine," she breathed, and then gulped. "But the consequences for this are on your head."

Trys crushed her to him in a tight hug. "Thank you, Elia. You won't regret this."

She gave a skeptical snort but turned to her wide-eyed brother, who hadn't taken his gaze off the gathering crowd. "We need to move quickly. Orin, take your silks and run upstairs. Trys, draw the curtains and stay as far from the windows and doors as you can. In fact, hide behind the counter. I have to go prepare the enchantment." When his brows lifted, she snarled, "I can't just snap my fingers and take you somewhere. The magic must be done properly."

She followed Orin as he took the steps two at a time. When he swung the apartment door open, she started barking orders.

"Orin, gather everyone's identity papers. Saya, take the emergency purse by the back door. There should be enough money in there to eat for a couple of days if you're frugal. Both of you go the long way to Rinna-Grivya's. Stay together. Use alleys and shop pass-throughs whenever you can. Don't do anything to call attention to yourselves. Hurry."

Saya's eyes had grown huge while Elia was talking. "What's going on?"

"Trouble. Orin will fill you in on the way. Be sure to tell Rinna-Grivya and Isak everything too." Elia rummaged through her trunk and pulled out a little bag of unstamped coins. She couldn't arrive in Serratura and try to use currency depicting the Valdan king. "The two of you need to stay together."

"What about Papa?" Saya cast a worried glance in his direction. "I can't just leave him."

"Send Rinna-Grivya back to assess the situation in a couple of hours. And do whatever she tells you." Elia took a silver lock plate from the stack on the shelf and dashed to Papa's side. "Let her know I said Isak can work for her for a month if she covers for us."

"He's going to love that," Orin smirked as he threw a satchel over his shoulder.

“And Myron?” Saya asked. She still hadn’t moved. “Who’s going to check on him? Elia, where are you going?”

Elia pulled Saya into a quick hug and kissed the top of her head. “Maisie will make sure he’s well. Right now, Myron is safer in the death temple than the two of you are in this shop. I’m taking the prince to Serratura in a few moments. I’ll see you in a couple of days.” Hopefully.

Saya didn’t have time to respond before Orin hauled her out the door by the wrist. When the door snicked shut behind them, she knelt by Papa. The sick sense of wrongness that accompanied every siphoning of his magic washed over her.

“This is the last time, Papa,” she quietly promised.

A thin stream of drool trickled down his cheek. The disease had wasted his body away to skin and bones. He was so much frailer than the jovial, full-cheeked man who she remembered. She gently wiped the drool with his blanket and blinked back the tears threatening to escape.

As Elia hummed the familiar tune, she positioned the plate over his heart, the place where spirit and blood met. The magic between Elia and Papa aligned perfectly, enabling her to unlock the pathways between the doors his magic could conjure or enchant. Rare as talented door Conjurors were, the alignment she had with Papa was even rarer, as it required perfect harmony between their magics. Elia shifted her humming into words, giving song to the spell. Just as Rinna-Grivya had taught her long ago. The spell would channel his magic from its source within Papa into his blood.

And now came the worst part. She tried to keep the song steady, but her stomach lurched with what she had to do. Withdrawing a small enchanted knife from her pocket, she pricked Papa’s ring finger. He didn’t flinch. His breathing didn’t even change. Could he feel pain in this state? She hoped not.

As his blood broke the surface of his skin, she pulled his hand to the plate and shifted the spellsong to drain the magic from him. When a bright red drop of blood pooled on the plate, she lifted his hand and placed a tiny indigo vial under his finger. Keeping pressure on his finger, she watched as the indigo turned black with the rising blood inside. The crystal vial was enchanted to keep Papa’s magic ready to use for their journey home. When the vial was full, she stoppered it and wrapped a clean linen bandage around Papa’s finger, tying it tight. She brought the spell to a close, barely whispering the part that thanked the gods for their touch. Elia hoped they

wouldn’t hear and notice this blasphemous act. She kissed his hand and put it back under the cover.

“Thank you, Papa. I love you. Rinna-Grivya will check on you soon.” She swept the hair off his face and gave him one last look before running back down the stairs.

Elia threaded the vial on a long silver chain and dropped it under the collar of her dress. Then she lifted the newly enchanted plate carefully and ran back down the stairs. She had to make it to the door before his blood dried. Trys popped up from his hiding spot and followed her to an extra door in the storage closet. Soldiers were bellowing his name outside the shop. Holding the plate tightly against the door, she chanted the travel spell for Serratura. The enchantment fastened the plate to the door, and, as Elia sang, a keyhole formed in the plate. She stepped back as she brought the chant to a close, again whispering the thanks to the gods.

The shop handle jiggled as someone beat against the door. Trys grabbed her hand.

“Before we leave,” she said quietly, “I just want you to know that I think this is a terrible idea.”

His grip on her hand tightened. “I respectfully disagree.”

Elia shook her head at him and then turned her attention to the door. She caressed the lock and hummed the incantation in a whisper-soft voice. The path to Serratura was unlike any other. It wandered with the floating isles. She swayed in the drift of key magic threading its course through her mind, looking for the nearly-impossible-to-find key. Droplets of perspiration formed on the skin of her temples. Her skin prickled as she reached deep into the roots of her magic, and it coalesced into a cold metal weight in her hand. She huffed with the exertion of the spell and the toll it took on her magic.

Elia continued the incantation and jammed the key in the lock before the path could shift with Serratura’s movements. On the spell’s final note, her shop door burst open. She threw the enchanted door open and pulled Trys through, pulling it shut behind them. He stumbled into her, and they twisted, falling into the grass-scented night.

OceanofPDF.com

11

Elia landed on top of Trys so hard the breath whooshed out of him. They'd made it. Barely. She rolled off Trys, shoving down all thoughts about how pleasant it was to be chest to chest with him and how perfectly they fit together. He coughed and sputtered, clutching his stomach.

She stood and faced the tavern's cellar door to close the pathway. The door vibrated under her fingers as she released the enchantment and the path back to Isalindra faded away. Elia placed her hand on the sunbaked wood of the cellar door. No thrum of a spellpath. No faint vibration of magic.

"Are we truly there?" Trys rasped. "Is this . . . ?" He swiveled his head this way and that, eyes growing larger by the second. She'd give him a minute to take it in while she made sure they were clear.

Laughter and singing filtered out from the tavern's open windows into the cool evening air. The first time she'd laid eyes on Serratura had been a night just like this. The scent of rain and mist that lingered even on a clear day. The vivid colors everywhere. Everything looked exactly the same as it had then. Trys was right to gape. Serratura was alive in a way that no other place was.

Fluffy white sheep bleated in the adjacent field dotted with daisies and clumps of sweetgrass. Overhead the stars were closer and clearer than in Isalindra, like the sparkling crystallized sugar Maisie sprinkled on cupcakes. But the memory of her banishment came crashing over her. This was not *her* Serratura. Not anymore.

Enough admiring the scenery. Elia needed answers. "Welcome to Serratura. I hope the scroll is worth your uncle's wrath. Even if you weren't there to hear his summons, you still planned and executed this excursion without his permission. Is my family in danger until you can come back to sort things out with the king?"

Trys shook his head. "He's looking for me, not you or your family. And even so, he's got a kingdom to rule and a war to wage. I doubt I'm a high

priority for him. He'll just tell the guards to watch for me and have them drag me to the palace as soon as they see me."

"If he hurts them—"

"He won't. And when we get back, I'll take full responsibility for every part of this." He grasped her hand. "Don't worry, Elia. I'll take care of it."

She had no choice but to trust him to handle it. If she returned now, she'd have to explain far more than an unsanctioned international voyage with a prince. Besides, they had made it to Serratura. They might as well make the trouble worth it by accomplishing their goals.

Elia took a deep breath and studied the tavern. Raucous laughter drifted on the breeze as patrons ambled into the night on the other side of the quaint tavern. The last thing they needed was to stand near the back door arguing in Valdanese, a language most Serraturans didn't know. Anyone could walk out and see two people wearing strange clothes having a conversation in a foreign language. The muted neutral colors and staid fashions of Isalindra would stand out here like weeds among lilies. And then there was whatever Trys was wearing. No one here would know what to make of that ensemble.

She turned back to Trys, who was still sitting in the dewy grass. "We need to get out of sight. Now."

Trys stood and dusted off his strange garment. As if on cue, a drunk farmer stumbled around the corner and glimpsed them loitering behind the tavern. He looked suspiciously at the prince. Trys straightened and stepped in front of Elia. It was sweet but pointless. She didn't move. Couldn't breathe. Was this it? He would see their clothes and hear their accents and report them. Maybe he'd even recognize her. So soon, just seconds after arriving, she'd be caught and killed.

The farmer wobbled toward them, shoes sliding in the gravel walkway. He held up a lantern and squinted into the shadows. "Is he bothering you, young miss?"

Elia lifted her head. The farmer's face was full of fatherly concern, of protection. She'd forgotten how community-minded Serraturans were, how hospitable . . . when they weren't trying to kill her. A pang of sorrow and loss seared her chest. She'd missed this place more than she'd admitted to herself.

Trys offered the man a slight bow. What was he doing? Her stomach flipped. He had to know Serraturans didn't bow. "By my sooth, ye gentle

landsman, this fair eve brought odd turnings of fate and ill betides. My companion is but mild overcome and hard put by it."

That delivery might have been impressive to the few Isalindran scholars who studied ancient Serraturan lore. But to a drunk farmer in modern Serratura, Trys's speech was half-intelligible and overly complex. What was Prince Smudge doing? Elia grasped for a way to turn this situation and satisfy the farmer's curiosity without causing a scene. Elia stood and took Tristan firmly by the elbow.

"Good neighbor," she said, using the standard Serraturan greeting for a friendly stranger and hoping to all the gods he was too drunk to notice her accent, "forgive my friend. We are actors preparing to perform an ancient play at the stratistheatre next lunar, and he likes to stay in character. We came from an exhausting rehearsal, thus our costumes." She gave an embarrassed gesture to their clothes. "We were just resting when you stopped by. Sorry to trouble you."

The farmer nodded along. "Can't afford stratistheatre tickets myself."

Elia gave a sympathetic smile. "I can only afford to be onstage."

He gave a hearty laugh and relaxed a bit. "Well, if you're sure there's no problems with this one"—he jerked his thumb at Trys—"I'll be going home 'fore the missus comes after me again."

"A peaceful evening to you, good neighbor." She waved.

He yawned and mumbled, "Gentle winds and silent clouds for us all." Then he turned and staggered down the lane.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Elia whirled on Trys. Her heart hammered, and heat rushed to her face. "What were you thinking? Were you trying to confuse him away?"

"What do you mean? He didn't seem confused." His brow wrinkled and he stared helplessly after the disappearing farmer. As if he hadn't followed the conversation at all.

She took a step back and clutched her skirt in her fist. This couldn't be. He couldn't be this clueless.

"Trys. Do you—" This *had* to be a joke . . . right? "Do you speak any Serraturan that doesn't sound like a resurrected poet from a thousand years ago?"

He blushed a bit. "There are no Serraturans living in Isalindra. Or anywhere outside of Serratura. I had to learn from letters, poetry, and

histories. Yes, some of them are ancient, but I figured the language in a closed country wouldn't change *that* much."

"In a thousand years? You thought there wouldn't be advances in language and culture? I don't even know what to say to that. Did you understand anything I said to that man just now?" She almost didn't want to know the answer.

He winced. "Something about neighbors and a theater and clouds?"

Her hand went to her temple, where a new headache began a dull throb. "We're both dead."

Steeling herself, Elia led Trys around the building to the front of the tavern and stopped with her hand on the worn iron door handle. It had been nearly a year since she'd last come here. Perhaps Joran had forgiven her by now. If he hadn't . . . well, they were doomed anyway.

"Come on," she said to herself as much as to Trys. "We have to go in. We can't spend the night in a sheep field where anyone could spot us."

He squinted at her in visible confusion. "But we need to go to the library."

She grabbed his arm so hard he yelped. Their lives depended on making him understand their situation. "The library. Ha. No. Not yet. We aren't close to the library, and we aren't remotely dressed in local fashion. Furthermore, you are a functionally illiterate foreign prince visiting a kingdom that is closed to outsiders. We need to get out of immediate danger first, and then make a new plan." His look of affront made her pause.

"I'm *not* illiterate."

"You studied the wrong Serraturan tongue, you monstrous terror," she hissed. "You want access to a scroll that likely doesn't exist, but if it does, it's being guarded by people you can't understand in a library you won't be able to navigate."

"I think we can just—"

"I don't care what you think. I'm not going to let your ignorance kill us."

She peeked through one of the smaller windows. Thank the merciful gods and the late hour, no other patrons lingered in the dim room. Then she pulled Trys through the front door.

The inside of the tavern was just as she remembered it. Arched timber beams with old birds' nests collecting dust in high corners. Dark booths that had been carved with so many initials it was hard to tell where one name

ended and another began. Had Joran sanded down the wood where she'd left her initials carved on the bar? Elia inhaled the sawdust-and-ale scent, and something inside her uncoiled, just a little. Someone whistled a familiar tune from a distant room, and dishes clattered almost in rhythm. She glanced at the barstool that had once been reserved for her.

A deep baritone she'd know anywhere laughed from the kitchen. Joran. He was teasing someone, probably whoever his kitchen boy was now. Her heart sank. What if his family had been afflicted? Her breath came in gasps as she tried to remember the name of his wife and children. Corielle. Erston. Zephyra. Hope sparked somewhere deep inside her. If she remembered their names, Joran's family was safe.

"What are we doing in here?" Trys whispered, pulling her from her thoughts. Thank the gods he was so pretty or she would've committed the capital crime of punching a royal.

"The only thing we can do." Elia steeled herself and threw her shoulders back. Then she walked to the tavern and slammed her palm on the heavy brass service bell.

"We're closed," Joran called from the kitchen. "Come back tomorrow."

A lump rose in her throat. The moment of truth. She called out, "There are no tomorrows for me, friend." *Friend.* Did that word still apply?

Joran thudded heavily into the room, hand over his mouth. He staggered as he looked at her, chest heaving. Other than more pronounced crow's-feet by his eyes, Joran was the same as she remembered him. Brawny and tall, with wavy gray-and-brown hair and hazel eyes that shone and danced. Elia repressed a smile at his lemon-yellow tunic. He still had a penchant for citrus colors.

After a moment of shocked staring, he replied, "Only the sorrow of endless today."

The line was lifted from their favorite Serraturan drama. They used to call the overwrought lines back and forth in exaggerated stage accents. She dipped her head in greeting.

"Sweet gods of sky and wind," he breathed. "I never, not in this or any lifetime, thought—"

"I know," she said. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be here, but I'm in trouble and have nowhere else to go. Please let me have a mat in your cellar, friend. Just for tonight. That's all I ask." In her utter panic, all the wrong words spewed out in rapid succession.

Joran shook his head. If he said no, they'd have to find a barn or storage house on one of the nearby farms and hope no one checked it until morning.

"You show up after all this time, unannounced, banished—rightly, I might add, for what you did—and ask for a mat in my cellar. Do you have any idea how it's been here? What we've been through? Maybe you should start this conversation somewhere other than asking for hospitality you know you don't deserve."

Elia dropped to her knees. Trys stared at her mutely. Why couldn't he just follow her lead? She yanked him to the floor beside her. The prince had probably only ever knelt to reach the lowest scrolls in the library.

Pressing her forehead to the floor, she offered a traditional Serraturan apology. "Joran, my offense was grievous. The memory of it fills me with shame. Forgive the harm I caused you, dear friend. Or at least forget long enough to let me pass by you in peace."

"Why are you apologizing?" Trys muttered.

The apology must have had enough ancient cognates for Trys to get the gist. But there was no time to explain to him now. This moment was critical.

Joran huffed. "Get up, Elia."

She rose to her feet as he went to bolt the front door.

"Wait while I dismiss the staff. After we talk, I'll decide whether to summon the nearest constable."

He strode off to the kitchen and started a loud conversation. In the pit of anxiety roiling in her stomach, a tiny ray of hope shone through.

"What's going on? I don't understand any of this," Trys muttered. Of course not. Prince Smudge had spent his library days reading all the wrong books.

"I promise I'll explain everything when we're settled in for the night. Until then, let me do the talking. Don't say anything, especially about the scroll." Elia paused. "Not that you could. Joran only speaks *modern* Serraturan."

Trys rolled his eyes. "I get it. I made a mistake. No need to keep rubbing it in."

Joran returned and fished three dark blue tumblers and a bottle of Vapor from under the counter. As he poured, the mist-colored liquor curled into the glasses like liquid smoke. Gods, she had missed its sweet, airy flavor. He slid the cups down the smooth, well-worn bar and raised his own.

“To friendships old and new,” Elia said, offering another line from the drama.

Joran countered with another line. “To sage advice and obscuring shadows.”

He looked expectantly at Trys, who held his cup aloft with a big, dimpled grin and spoke a jumble of ancient Serraturan words. Joran’s brows rose.

“To whatever that was too,” he said, and met their glasses midair. “Now”—he sipped from his cup, and they followed suit—“Explain why you’re risking your life and mine to demand my hospitality.”

The gossamer touch of the Vapor on her tongue brought back a flood of memories from happier times. But Elia knitted her fingers together on her lap. “First, tell me. Corielle, Erston, and Zephyra?”

“They are remembered and loved.” He nodded.

Elia let out a half breath, half sob. “Thank all the gods. I spent so many nights worried for them. For you and your family. I hoped my memories of them weren’t an anomaly of the plague.”

“No, it passed them by. Unlike many parts of Serratura. About half of the people in the capital were infected. If the Nameless Queen finds out you’re here—”

“Nameless? She still had her name when I left. It was . . .” Elia had just been thinking of it. Hadn’t she? But the queen’s name evaporated like morning dew from her mind. “It was something.” Come to think of it, who was the queen of Serratura at the moment? Was it the same mysterious person who’d banished her?

“She was the last of the afflicted. Her symptoms showed up only days after your banishment. They called it the Conjurista’s Revenge. Here.”

He placed a stamped gold token on the table. A gorgeous young woman wearing a crown was etched into the gold. Elia’s heart skipped. And just like that, the name was on her tongue. Violetta. Queen Violetta. Elia sucked in a breath. Violetta’s profile was a little vague on the token, but it summoned the memory of her true splendor. Violetta, whose rage burned bright and beautiful in Elia’s vivid nightmares. Violetta, who had laughed with her under a fragrant jasmine trellis only two days before the plague. Violetta, whose mercy had hurt more than death. How could Elia have forgotten?

Joran nodded, recognizing her pain. “It was a cruel plague, wasn’t it? We made the tokens to remember her. Each one has the tiniest drop of her blood in it to counteract the effects. We don’t use them for currency. There aren’t enough in circulation for that. But every household has a few. She still rules us, but it’s like having a ghost queen.”

Elia hunched. “I’m so sorry.”

“Stop apologizing and tell me why you’re here, Elia,” he said firmly. He pocketed the token, and the queen faded from her memories. What was her name?

Elia glanced at the prince. He was watching the conversation intently, like he was trying to sift the slightest meaning from their words. She stuck her thumb toward him. “This is Trystoferian Alexios Magnus Felipe Lightdragon, Ninth Prince of Isalindra, Duke of Valdan, Lord of Umbreck Estate. He is desperate to find a way to stop a war that has taken so much from our people. He begged me to make a door to Serratura. He wants to consult the scrolls of the Great Library for wisdom.”

Joran looked skeptically at Trys. “Prince, uh, whatshisname—”

“He goes by Trys.” Elia sipped her drink. But even the fine liquor couldn’t dispel the awkwardness of the introduction.

Trys shuffled on his barstool, clearly uncomfortable at being the focus of a conversation he couldn’t understand.

Joran eyed Trys uncertainly. “Okay. *Trys* asked you for a door to the library so he could study, and you risked death for *that*?” Pure, unfiltered disbelief settled on his face.

She sighed. Should she tell Joran? The more he knew, the more he would be implicated if she and Trys were caught. But he was also her friend. He deserved as much of the truth as she could give him. “No. There’s more. My youngest brother, Myron, has been godstouched.”

“With what magic? Which god?”

“Morthanos made him a Deathfate.” Elia paused while Joran’s face fell. It was a horrible fate, even here in the floating isles.

He sipped his Vapor. “Gods of sky and winds save him.”

Elia scoffed. “Like they would. But I was told about a rite in the library. Something that explains how to break a godstouch. I agreed to come with the prince to find it.”

Joran let out a breath. “Well, you’re nothing if not ambitious.” She doubted that was a compliment. “Your father. Is he . . . ?”

Elia looked away. She didn’t want to see any further pain on his face. “He’s still alive. Barely. In two months, I plan to send him through the gate.”

Joran swallowed and raised his Vapor glass. “May the gods witness his passage.” She clinked his glass, and they both took a drink. He raised an eyebrow at her. “And your debt collectors?”

“Vulturous as ever.”

“And the other children?”

“Hungry, growing, helpless, and talented. In various measures.”

Joran raked his fingers through his hair. “You’re never simple. Why hasn’t this prince—Trys—why hasn’t he said a word yet?”

Elia laughed humorlessly. “He only studied *ancient* Serraturan before coming here. He learned from poems and histories.”

Joran choked on his liquor and sputtered, “How is that going to help you?” He paused while Trys stared blankly back at him. “You need to go home. Now. This is the most ludicrous thing you’ve ever done, Elia.”

“I *need* that rite, Joran. I can’t lose Myron.”

Joran swore. “But you’re going to get captured or killed. You should leave while you can.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” a deep female voice said right by her ear as an arm wrapped around Elia’s chest and the point of a dagger pricked her neck.

OceanofPDF.com

12

Elia tried not to gulp. “Corielle. I’m glad you’re remembered and well.”

“Get away from her!” Trys jumped off his stool, on the verge of attacking Corielle.

“Trys, no. Sit back down,” Elia said, trying to tamp down her rising panic. His fists were balled tightly by his sides. “I deserve this. This and far worse. I’m *begging* you not to intervene.” She took another breath. “But if she kills me, take care of my family.”

Joran walked around the counter and put his hands on his wife’s shoulders. “Peace, my love. Our friend Elia isn’t here to hurt us or unlock danger again.”

“She may have been our friend once, but we ought to turn her over to the royal guard for what she’s done,” Corielle said, slowly moving the knife back from Elia’s throat. “I heard everything you said, Elia. I can’t believe you risked us in this mad scheme.”

“You’re right, Cori. I don’t blame you for wanting to kill me. By the gods, if you did, all of Serratura would hail you as a hero and give you a festival day on the calendar.” Elia’s voice quivered.

Corielle’s lips twisted and her brows furrowed, vacillating between pain and rage. “We were like family until that day. And then you betrayed us all. I should hate you. I should turn you over to the royal guards for the fate you deserve. Why are you here? Not in Serratura, but in our tavern?”

Elia didn’t move from Corielle’s grip. “Because this was the safest place I could think of in a pinch. But also, because out of everyone in this country, I wanted to apologize to you first.”

Corielle released Elia and shoved her away. “I heard when you apologized to Joran, but Elia—”

“Please, for the sake of our old friendship”—Elia clasped her hands together—“I’m begging for shelter for one night. It doesn’t even have to be in the main house. The cellar is fine for us. In the morning, we’ll go, and I swear we won’t breathe a word that we were here.”

Corielle faced Elia with her fists clenched at her sides. Elia didn't break eye contact.

"Please, Cori," she whispered.

Corielle let out a long exhale as she debated with herself. A minute passed. Then another.

Finally, Cori scowled. "One night. You may be a gifted Conjurista, but your godstouch came with a sorrow-touch too, didn't it? Everything near you gets pulled into its orbit." She sheathed her knife.

Elia gave Cori a watery smile. She'd missed her so much.

"Where's Catello? I've missed hearing him play." Corielle's brother was the most talented lutist she'd ever heard. His songs could bring laughter or tears within seconds.

Corielle winced and looked away. "Catello is . . . he . . ."

Joran swallowed the rest of his liquor and set the cup down firmly. "A few months after you were banished, he jumped."

The room tipped as Elia's heart plummeted. "What? Jumped? Why?" Memories of Catello surfaced. Grinning as he played. Flirting with pretty patrons, male and female. Elia's throat was raw, and her eyes burned at the thought of never seeing him again.

Corielle's eyes brimmed silver. "He left a note and said he was going to the horizon cliffs. We never found him."

"Half the town helped us look." Joran stared down at the bar. "But he was one of the plague-afflicted. We had to keep showing his portrait to everyone, and it slowed the search party down."

Corielle wrapped her arms around herself. "We knew he was truly gone when his name and all our memories of him came rushing back without needing his portrait."

Elia's stomach twisted in horror. His death had been her fault. How many others had jumped because of what she'd done?

"That's the final stage of the plague," Joran said quietly. "Memories of those who were infected return when they die. After Catello . . . jumped, the whole town remembered him and mourned him. A lot of the plague-afflicted became jumpers. I only hope the gods of sky and wind remember them in the afterlife."

It was too much. Elia felt the floorboards under her knees before she realized she'd collapsed. Hot tears coursed down her cheeks and neck as

she sobbed. In an instant, Trys was kneeling by her side, his arm thrown around her protectively.

“Elia, are you okay? Why is everyone upset?” He glanced up at Joran and Corielle, but they remained where they were. “Maybe we should leave.”

“No.” She wiped her eyes. “We’re safest here for the night. I’ll explain everything later.”

He looked doubtfully between her and the Serraturans, but he stayed beside her, silent and watchful.

Joran knelt in front of her and took her hands. His eyes were filled with sympathy and sorrow. “You didn’t know what would happen when you unlocked the curse bindings. Honestly, no one should have been able to unlock anything in the curse-vault. So, it was a shock in more ways than one.”

“I thought it was a spell vault,” Elia said.

Joran let out a little, bitter laugh. “I know. That’s why you should have gone with someone who could read Serraturan. Any local could’ve told you what the warning signs outside the vault said.”

He was right. Ever since that awful night, Elia had obsessed over every detail of what had happened. Even as the cursed ink had lifted into a miasmic cloud, any Serraturan could have read the doom in its characters and called a master binder to stop it. But she had been arrogant, with too much bravado and too little sense. The curse had become unstoppable by the time it escaped the vault.

Joran sighed. “What’s done is done. I was so angry with you for a long time. Especially after Catello. But I’ve had time to think. To adjust to the new reality. And for any right I have to offer it, I forgive you.” He gently pushed her back and looked into her eyes. “Even though you shouldn’t be here, I’m glad I had the chance to tell you.”

He pressed a kiss to her forehead and pulled her back into his arms. She shook with heaving sobs, and her whole body trembled as grief clawed its way out of her. Joran was only a little younger than her father. With her eyes closed, she could almost imagine it was Papa holding her close.

After a moment, another, smaller hand landed on her shoulder. Elia turned. Corielle. Her eyebrows were drawn together and her lips turned down, but a familiar softness had returned to her eyes.

Corielle sheathed her dagger. “For my part, I have not fully forgiven you. I wish your magic had never brought you here in the first place. But I don’t wish you dead anymore. And that’s something, I guess. Let’s get you both settled in the cellar.”

Elia and Trys followed Joran down the stairs and into the cellar’s cool darkness. They carried everlanterns, bronze globes enchanted to illuminate on command, which cost a fortune in Isalindra but were abundant in Serratura. Joran laid two pallets for them on opposite sides of the clean, dry room. Before retiring for the evening, he handed her the gold token with the queen’s profile stamped on it.

“So you’ll remember.” He gave a wan smile and retreated up the steps.

Elia turned the coin over in her palm, studying Violetta’s face as golden lantern light flickered over the surface. “How could I forget?” she murmured in Serraturan, though Joran was already gone.

She trudged to her pallet and faced Trys. It was time to clear the air.

“Trys, I—” she began.

“I should have told you before we made our oath that I didn’t have my uncle’s clearance,” he blurted with a guilty grimace.

“Why didn’t you?” She took a seat on a barrel of wine.

He sat across from her. “I thought you wouldn’t take me.” He was right about that. Side jobs and under-the-table payments were one thing for her family of commoners. Flouting royal protocols was another thing altogether and far from worth the risk. “I never bothered to ask him, anyway. I’ve never told him about my interest in the scroll, so I figured he would never suspect I was connected to it. If I found the scroll and it worked, I’d be home before he’d realize I was gone. And if he ever did discover I was the one who’d used it, I thought it’d be too late for him to punish me since the war would already be over anyway. I knew he wouldn’t allow me to go to Serratura without knowing why, so it seemed easiest to forgo getting permission.”

Elia’s jaw dropped in disbelief. “You put my whole family in danger because you didn’t want to hear no from your uncle?”

“We wouldn’t be here right now if I had. He probably would have put me under guard in the palace to keep me from going.”

“We shouldn’t be here *right now* anyway,” she snapped. “We were supposed to plan and prepare. The way we’re going about this now is madness.”

He waved a hand. “We’ll be fine. I believe in your ability to be a guide. Just trust that I can find the information we need once we’re at the library.”

That trust was ebbing away every time he blundered. Between his ludicrous outfit and ancient Serraturan, there was precious little left.

“That’s *my* confession, Elia,” he continued, a new edge entering his voice. “Now it’s your turn. What was that about upstairs?”

He waited as she took a deep breath and tried to collect herself. Then Elia summarized her conversation with Joran and Corielle. While she spoke, he sat on his barrel and listened quietly, but his eyes grew wider and wider in horror when he heard about the afflicted Serraturans.

“You unleashed a plague?” he asked, voice barely above a whisper. “How is that even possible?”

“You’ve studied enough of Serratura to know that, other than scholarship, their chief pride is binding magic, right?”

His brow crinkled. “But what does that have to do with anything? And why didn’t you tell me any of this?” Trys shoved a hand deep into his curls and let out a frustrated groan. “It’s so much worse than anything I imagined. I thought you stole something or angered the wrong person. But you . . . you *infected* people.” He hopped off the barrel and began furiously pacing between the neat rows of supplies and food stores. “No wonder you never wanted to come back here. You should have brought this up when we formed a contract. What else are you hiding?”

Elia sighed. “You need to know a bit of my history to understand what happened here. When I was fourteen, it was clear that my magic was strong enough that I could successfully unlock a path to Serratura. My father is one of the only door Conjurors in the world with magic strong enough to create the door. He offered to make the door and let me try to unlock the path to Serratura, despite the risk. And after it worked, I couldn’t stay away. I love this country and these people.”

Trys returned to his barrel and sat again, unable to resist more information about the subject of his academic passion despite his anger. “I’ve heard of what happens when people miss. It must be a difficult pathway.”

She fiddled with the corner of her blanket. “Since the islands are floating and constantly relocating, it’s like hitting a moving target in the dark. But I’ve always had a knack for sensing pathways. It is difficult, but not impossible, to locate Serratura’s path and access it. Back then, I was

always looking for a challenge, trying to see how far I could stretch my magic. For a key Conjurista, an unlocker, this kingdom of binding magic was an obstacle course I couldn't resist. And the kindness of the locals, starting with the people in this tavern, bound my heart to this country." She pulled the token out and looked at Violetta's face. "She used to come to the tavern sometimes—Violetta did—to escape the stress of palace life. When I first met her, I didn't know she was the queen. She went by Via and wore a disguise. But as time went on, we became dear friends."

Elia licked her lips, which drew Trys's eyes to her mouth for the briefest moment. Her stomach fluttered, but she pressed forward. "For years, Serratura was my escape, my pride, my dream. I made friends, tested my magic, learned to unlock even the most complicated locks. I was eager to push my magic to its limit and then a little further. I was arrogant and curious and bold. But then I went too far and . . ." A lump hardened in her throat, and heat rose to her cheeks. This was so shameful.

"Keep going," he said firmly. "I need to hear the rest."

Elia looked away. She pocketed the token and let Violetta's lovely face fade from her memory. He was going to hate her when he heard this, but it would be better for him to learn the truth from her directly rather than whatever garbled information he could glean through translation.

"It's a long story, but the short version is that I broke into a place I shouldn't have. Serratura keeps its most dangerous and cherished spells in the Great Hall of Vaults." She took a breath. "In the dead of night, while the vault-keepers slept, I snuck into the most warded vault in the hall. I thought it was the Vault of Treasure, but I'd never learned to read Serraturan. I hoped it contained some vast treasure or glorious secret. Turns out, it was the Vault of Sorrow. The whole room was shrouded in layers and layers of wards. Someone had spent ages on securing this vault, but rather than consider that maybe whatever was in there should stay put, I saw an obstacle to overcome and eagerly pushed my magic into the room. It took hours upon hours, and most of my magic, but I undid them one by one. Finally, I'd unlocked enough of the bindings to reach the center of the room. But the only thing there was a scroll. As I approached, it lifted into the air, unrestrained now that I'd unlocked every binding in the room. The ink lifted character by character from the page and formed a dark red cloud, and in that moment, I knew I'd done something wrong."

“What did you do?” Trys’s eyes were huge, all indignation gone from his face as he listened to her story.

“I screamed for help, but I was so deep in the vault that none of the wardens heard me. The ink cloud flew from the vault and out into the city with unnatural speed. I could do nothing to stop it. I was exhausted from pushing my magic. Drained. I passed out on the vault floor. I woke in prison. I learned later that treasure scrolls are only inked in gold, but the writing on this one was deepest crimson. A curse-scroll. During my trial, they told me I’d unleashed a memory plague. Those who are afflicted are erased from the memory of everyone, except those who are actually in their presence.”

Trys’s brows lifted. “Wait. Do you mean that if I were afflicted, you wouldn’t know I exist?”

“Yes. But while I was in prison, the High Healer discovered that imagery containing a piece of the infected person would return memories. If you were infected, I wouldn’t remember you unless I looked at a portrait containing your hair or blood or some other part of you. When we leave, you’ll see many Serraturans wearing small portraits of their loved ones. The portraits have hair or fingernail clippings or a drop of blood ground into the paint. You can imagine the pandemonium that caused. People couldn’t remember their children, spouses, friends, neighbors, employers. It’s why I wear this bracelet.”

She held up her left arm, and Trys leaned over to inspect the small silver chambers. “I thought it was charms or religious relics.”

“I’m not that superstitious. The chambers each contain a tiny portrait of my family members with a drop of their blood mixed into the paint. The chambers are spelled to protect them from any damage. That way if I’d brought the contagion back with me or if it ever spread outside Serratura, I’d remember them. Even though it’s been almost a year, I always carry it just in case.”

Trys was silent as he ran his thumb over the chambers. The heat of his fingers on her wrist gave her gooseflesh. But he needed to hear the rest.

“Tonight, Joran told me Serratura’s queen was one of the afflicted.” Elia paused. Some personal history surrounded the queen, lingering in a forgetful haze just outside her memory. But she couldn’t grasp it until she removed the token from her pocket and looked at Violetta’s silhouette. Then the memories came flooding back. “I guess I should be grateful that she

didn’t execute me outright. She banished me instead. The official edict said if I return, I’ll suffer an agonizing, slow death before my body is cast over the horizon into the nearest sea, where I could at least do the good of feeding a shark or water dragon. Now I don’t test my magic or push myself. I fulfill travel contracts to safe, easy destinations. I do a little bit of locksmithing on the side, and I keep my head down. Because I can’t bear the cost of making a mistake like that again. And my family can’t bear the cost of trying to survive without me.”

He probably hated her now. Who wouldn’t? What she’d done was unforgivable. She should have just turned down the prince’s riches and tried to find some other way to save Myron. There had to be something she could’ve done. A deal with Morthanos, perhaps. Why had she been so stupid? Hadn’t she learned to smother her pride yet? She tried to pull her hands back from Trys to cover her face, but he tightened his grip. She looked up at him. A fiery intensity burned in his eyes.

“We *will* leave here alive. I won’t let anything happen to you. On my honor as a Lightdragon . . . and on my honor as your . . . your friend, I swear it.” Then he pulled her into an embrace. His sandalwood-and-grapefruit scent enveloped her, and something inside her loosened. His arms were warm and comforting.

But she had to focus on saving Myron. She’d make this journey count. When Myron was free, maybe then she’d figure out why her stupid heart skipped a beat at every touch from this scholar prince.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner,” she mumbled against his chest.

Trys lifted her chin until their eyes met, and he tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “Of course I wish you had trusted me enough to tell me. And naturally I’m worried about our situation. But I still would have taken the risk of coming here with you. No more secrets, okay?”

“Okay,” she breathed.

When he finally released her, they settled onto their pallets. How had she ever thought Trys was a spoiled brat? And how could he be so kind and compassionate after learning what she’d done? He could have raged at her, rejected her, been disgusted by her. But he’d listened. He’d believed she’d made a mistake, that it hadn’t been intentional. If they were caught, she had no idea what the Serraturans, or his own uncle for that matter, would do to him. Nothing good. The thought made her queasy.

No matter what, she’d make sure he stayed alive. She’d bargain, beg, anything to keep him safe. She silently swore it on all the gods. He *would* make it through this.

Her oath made, she drifted into an uneasy sleep.

OceanofPDF.com

13

After breakfast, Elia sat still as stone while Corielle painted swirling designs on her face. The cold ink settled into her skin and tightened.

“With your face painted for the Nalani festival, no one will recognize you,” Corielle said.

Joran fiddled with the braids in his thick beard as he watched Corielle work. “You’re not half bad at this, Cori my love.”

“Not half bad?” Corielle protested. “You mean I’m amazing at this and should sell my painting services.”

Elia laughed. If only Maisie could see her now. In Isalindra, people celebrated the Nalani festival in dramatic, ornate masks. Matched masks meant exclusive couples. But here in Serratura, almost everyone wore enchanted festival paint in bright colors and patterns that complemented their partner’s or signaled that a new partner was desired.

Trys scooted closer to Elia and whispered, “But if we’re painted to match, won’t people think . . . ?”

“That we’re monogamous lovers?” Elia laughed. “Yes, Trys. That’s the whole point. We’ll be hassled less, and no one will try to whisk either of us away to a bedchamber. And there’s no need to whisper. They can’t understand you.”

Corielle smacked her arm. “Stop talking or you’ll ruin my design. There are things you need to know if you want to survive this foolhardy quest. Serratura has been even more closed off since your banishment. They dismissed most of the foreign witches and scholars who grew up studying here.” She gave Trys a sidelong glance. “It’s for the best if he plays mute. He seems a bit clueless.”

She stopped painting to let Elia speak. “He’s a scholar. Head in the scrolls, heart that pumps only ink. He’s clueless in his own kingdom too.”

Corielle laughed, and Trys wrinkled his nose. “Are you two talking about me?”

Corielle must have guessed what he asked because she tousled his hair and tsked at him. “He’s cute for a scholar, though. Pretending to be his

lover shouldn’t be *too* tough.”

Unexpected heat crept into Elia’s cheeks. Trys looked back and forth between them. “What’s she saying?”

Joran sat on the floor next to Corielle. “I asked our neighbor, Melius, to give you a ride into town. He’s a farmer, and his wife makes pottery. He’ll let you ride in his wagon to the outer ring, and then you can find your way from there.”

Corielle frowned. “That’s dangerous. What if Elia is recognized?”

“*I* barely recognize them after all the work you’ve done. They should be fine as long as this supposed scholar keeps his mouth shut.” Joran jerked his thumb at Trys, and Elia had to stifle a laugh so she didn’t ruin Corielle’s work.

When Corielle was finished, Elia and Trys matched. She’d painted swirling floral designs and tiny phrases from Nalanian poetry in blue over a gold background on their faces. Even their lips were covered in hearts and scrolls. Poetry that began on her face ended on his. Corielle had braided Elia’s hair into a crown with charms threaded through it. The traditional Nalani festival paint was enchanted to stay unmarred until Nalani’s moon waned unless it was removed with a magical potion. She could sweat, cry, bathe, or do any number of activities without disrupting the paint. A perfect disguise.

The Serraturan clothes they borrowed were long, brightly colored tunics and soft silk trousers, looser and more comfortable than Isalindran city clothes. At least now they wouldn’t be immediately recognized as outsiders and imprisoned.

“Ditch that fool if you have to, Elia,” Joran said in a low voice. “Don’t get executed because he wants to do something stupid.” His face filled with conflicted warmth. “I don’t want to lose you all over again.”

Elia’s throat tightened, but before she could respond, Corielle spoke up. “What’s the plan if you’re captured?”

“If we’re captured, or if I’m captured, I’d jump before I’d ever give you up. You know that, right? I’d never betray you for helping me.”

A pained look came over Corielle’s face when Elia said “jump.” Maybe she should have worded that differently, considering Catello. But Corielle just stepped away from them, lips drawn in a tight line.

“Just go.” Corielle pointed at the door.

Trys took the hint and strode toward the door. But they weren't his friends. This might be the last time she saw them. She couldn't leave things like this.

Elia threw her arms around Corielle, who stiffened and then relaxed a bit. Elia whispered, "Thank you. No matter what comes next, I'm glad I got to see you one more time."

When Elia pulled back, conflicting emotions warred on Corielle's face, but she didn't say anything. Joran pulled Elia into an embrace.

"I really wish I could hate you. It would make everything so much easier. But"—he paused to let out a breath—"As usual, things are never simple where you're concerned. Just stay out of trouble while you're here."

She winced and nodded. Runa save her, Elia would do everything in her power to do just that.

"Now, get out of here before I change my mind about turning you in." He gave her an affectionate shove toward the door.

As Elia and Trys exited the tavern, she took in the winding gravel country lane before them. The road was pocked with divots and shallow puddles. It was going to be a bumpy ride. An old man in a straw hat slouched in an open wagon in the lane, waiting for them. The journey into the city would take hours, but that would give her time to plan how to relocate the pathway back to Isalindra on the way there. She wouldn't endanger Joran and Corielle again.

Before Trys climbed into the wagon, Elia tapped his arm. "Don't forget you're mute, *lover*." She spoke in his ear in Valdanese. "Now smile like I've said something interesting."

Trys tensed at the term of endearment, but he played along, resting his head against hers and nuzzling into her as though she'd just whispered something flirtatious. Sweet Nalani, give her strength. Trys's act was too good for some scroll-obsessed scholar who probably learned everything he knew about romance from books. Melius smiled and glanced away. Good. Now if Trys could keep his mouth shut until they were alone, they might just stay alive a little longer.

Between the crates of pottery and produce, there was just enough room for Elia and Trys to sit hip to hip with their backs against the wagon. The full lengths of their legs pressed together, warming Elia's whole body. He slid his arm around her shoulders, cushioning her head against his chest. He was just being helpful since the ride was so bumpy. Right? She glanced up

at him, but his eyes were closed, face turned up to the sun. She was on fire everywhere their bodies touched.

Her stomach was in knots. But Melius wasn't much of a talker, and after a few mild comments about the fine weather and polite inquiries regarding their comfort, he settled into amicable silence. Thank all the gods.

They alternated napping and awkwardly smiling at each other when the cart jostled them together. Stops were brief and perfunctory. All the while, the Serraturan countryside drifted by. Fields dotted with sheep and goats, orchards and vineyards, sprawling farms and apiaries all eventually gave way to clusters of houses and micro-towns. Those grew in number and density until they finally reached the outer ring of the city at dusk. Unlike Isalindra, there were no walls, no gates. Who would try to invade floating islands?

Serratura was organized in concentric circles, crosscut dozens of times by roads, alleys, and passages. The outermost ring, the Viand Ring, encircled the city with bread, ale, vegetables, meat, and every manner of food and liquor vendors. Though food carts and restaurants dotted every ring, they all sourced their provisions from the Viand Ring. This was where they parted ways with Melius.

Elia pressed a gold piece into his hand, despite his protests. "Thank you, good neighbor. Please accept this as a token of appreciation. May the gods smile on your business."

"And yours," he muttered, shoving the piece into his pocket.

Elia nodded to Trys and held his hand in case he tried to say anything to Melius. His breath caught, and he looked down at their joined hands, neck reddening to dark bronze.

"Ready, dear?" She raised one eyebrow at him.

He smiled and fell into step beside her as they threaded their way through alleys and backstreets toward the central ring. Spice and roasting vegetable scents lingered on the air as they walked. People wearing bright tunics gathered in groups at outdoor tables, where they laughed, ate, and sang. Many of them sat still to have their faces adorned in festival paint.

They crossed the Casting Ring next, where blacksmiths, jewelers, and stone vendors made and sold metal and stone wares. Though the shops were starting to close for the day, rhythmic plinking and the hiss of hot metal in water still echoed through the streets. Serraturan couples left jewelry shops with sparkling hands and secret smiles. When Elia and Trys passed through

the Thread Ring, with its famed Sartorialists and legendary fabrics, she almost stopped to purchase cloudsilk for Orin. But her Isalindran accent and haggling would have given her away as a foreigner, and she could not bring herself to embrace the Serraturan custom of accepting prices as written. Besides, the sooner they got in and out of the library, the sooner they could go home.

The Tinkers' Ring intrigued Trys. He kept pausing to gawk at the imaginative inventions and complicated magical devices, and Elia had to drag him away.

"Nik would have loved this place," he whispered to her when no one was around. "He loved inventions and science. He was always buying strange magical devices and bringing them home." His face crumpled a little. "I'd give anything to be traveling with him on a holiday rather than . . . the reason we're here."

Elia slipped her hand into his again and squeezed. She couldn't imagine the pain of permanently losing one of her siblings. The death temple claiming Myron was bad enough, but at least she had a chance of bringing him home. Trys would never see his brother again. Ending the war was the closest he'd come to peace with that loss.

"Come on," she said gently. "I'm not such bad company." When his lips quirked up, it felt like a victory. She tugged his hand. "We're almost there now."

They sped through the Merry Ring with its playhouses, concert venues, art galleries, and sculpture gardens. Several rings later, they made it to the innermost one. The Scholars' Ring. The center of Isalindra was its banks and financial institutions, but Serratura kept its scholars closest to its heart. The Great Serraturan Library was larger and more ornately crafted than the adjoining royal palace.

Trys gaped when he saw the library's soaring spires and opalescent domes, glimmering peach and gold in the setting sun. They sat on a bench across the street from the library. Hardly anyone was around, but any onlookers would merely have seen a couple in festive dress snuggling on a bench. Not at all unusual during the Nalani festival.

He put his arm around her and brought his face so close that his breath tickled her ear when he whispered, "How are we supposed to get in there?"

She shivered and said in an equally low voice, "Lucky for us, it's the easiest place to visit on all the floating isles. Every Serraturan citizen can

visit the library at any time. Locals consider it to be the jewel of the kingdom. We'll just walk in. You know where to go, right?" She didn't dare voice the name of the scroll, even on a deserted street.

He gave her a guilty look. "I didn't know the library would be the size of a castle. Our libraries are so small by comparison."

Elia pulled back even as she kept her voice low. "The library here is more magical than anything we have at home. It shifts. Parts of it are invisible at certain times of the year. There are endless hidden passages. Magically trained animals act as library assistants. We could search the rest of our lives and never find . . . it."

He set his jaw. "I know that. I *did* spend the last several years studying Serratura. The . . . uh, thing we're looking for has a certain magical signature that I should be able to trace with my Mense magic. I already know the approximate area it was last stored in, but not the exact location. I need to do a bit more research. Maybe you could help. It sounds like you're familiar with the library."

She shrugged. "I don't read Serraturan, remember? When I used to come here, it was never for scroll-learning."

Trys gazed longingly at the majestic library. "Let's get lodgings for tonight. I brought my notes and some texts with me." He patted his satchel. "I'll research and try to make a plan."

How were ancient scrolls he'd already probably memorized by now going to give any new information? "You need new source material."

Trys gaped at her. "Excuse me?"

She turned to face him on the bench. "I don't really know much about how Lore-mense magic works, but if it's similar to Isak's Math-mense magic, then new information is like fuel to your magical fire."

He grinned. "I don't often meet people outside of libraries and universities who understand that."

She shrugged. "What if we enter the library now, and you do whatever you do when you're looking for information? Then we'll see what we find. Maybe a map with a big red X marking the spot will just jump into your arms."

His lips turned down in a much too attractive pout. "You're mocking me."

She let out a little laugh. Was he so unused to gentle teasing? "Just a bit. I mean it, though. If we go in and you do . . . whatever Lore-mense magic

is, maybe we'll find something helpful."

He hesitated for a moment before nodding. "The magic enables me to quickly locate texts and information that help me achieve my academic goals. It also enhances my cognition of the nuances of language, culture, and contexts in foreign works that might otherwise take years—"

Elia cut him off with a laugh before he could launch into a lecture. "Okay. Let's try it."

The entrance of the Great Serraturan Library stood at least three stories high. The broad threshold was inlaid with gold script. There was no actual door. The library was open to any citizen at any time, even in the middle of the night. Elia rubbed her fingers against the priceless gold text.

"It's in ancient Serraturan," Trys muttered. "Finally, something here I can read." He scrutinized it for a moment. "It's just a poem of welcome."

Elia laughed. "What did you think? That the library would lift her skirts to show her secrets to any visitor?"

Trys made an adorable choking noise that made the fleeting shame from the lewd comment worth it.

The entry hall was nearly empty. Most of the scholars had probably left to attend the Nalani festival events for the evening. In the foyer, Elia and Trys passed the Center of Learning, where visitors could ask for help. The desk lamp was off, and papers were neatly stacked on the desk, indicating that the attendant had likely left for the day. From the Center of Learning, paths broke off into various sections of the library.

Trys tightened his grip on her hand, and a warm current zinged up her arm from the contact. He closed his eyes and murmured something Elia couldn't quite catch. A chant or a spell, perhaps. Chill bumps rose on his arms despite the warmth of the late afternoon. After a few seconds, his eyes flew open, glowing green with Mense magic, and he began walking along the northernmost path, obviously following his magic.

Shelf lemurs chirped and called to each other as they swung between the shelves far above them. Elia wished she knew the Serraturan scholars' enchanted summons for them so she could see one up close. The rows of stacks gradually narrowed as they progressed, and Trys clutched his satchel to his chest so it wouldn't dislodge oversized books and scrolls. Elia ran her hand along the tops of the scrolls, smirking when Trys winced at her disrespect. Just because he was a scholar didn't mean she had to treat the

scrolls like they were holy. Finally, Trys stopped in front of a dusty shelf in a dim alcove. His hand hovered over a gray scroll, and he inhaled deeply.

“That’s the one,” he whispered, setting his satchel on the floor.

He pulled out the scroll and unfurled it. It could have been a recipe for cheese bread for all Elia could tell. But Trys’s eyes grew large, and his back straightened. Whirling to the nearest worktable, he removed a blank parchment from his satchel and carefully placed it on the scroll.

“What are you doing?” she hissed, and looked around.

He glanced up at her from his seat at the table. “We can’t take this scroll with us. It’s covered in spells to enchant against theft. The scholars, librarians, and royal guard will come after us if we try to remove it without official permission. So, I’m using scholar sheets to magically copy the information. Don’t worry; they won’t hurt the scroll.”

Trys quietly sang an incantation over the sheets, and fresh ink appeared on the pages, displaying identical text to what was on the scroll. Who knew librarians were so protective of every little scroll? Maybe tight security was a universal trait of all libraries, but the instinct to lock everything down was distinctly Serraturan as well. Protect anything remotely valuable or old with spells and charms and wards. Never mind the fact that there was virtually no crime in the floating isles. It was what had made testing her magic here so fun back in the old days. Before she went too far.

She let out a breath. “So what will you do about getting *the* scroll out of here?”

He gave her a blank look. “I’m only here to read it, not take it.”

“We’re risking our lives for you to get some reading done?”

“No. All the lore says that reading it is enough. Let’s talk about this later. I need to concentrate.”

His eyes darted back and forth over the scroll like a wild pendulum as he ensured that every character was accurately copied onto the scholar sheets. Elia tried to keep a lookout for scholars or other passersby who might report a pair of strange visitors. But no one came. Trys should be safe enough. Watching his magic at work was mesmerizing, and as his stack of completed sheets grew, so did her determination to ask for his help. After all, she needed something from this library too. Somewhere in the hallowed vaults of the library’s underbelly was a rite that could break a godstouch. That could save Myron.

“Trys?”

He was chewing on his lower lip in a way that would have been distracting if her purpose weren't so dire. "Hmm?"

"Do you think you could find information on *any* topic?"

"As long as it isn't warded against Mense magic, sure." He hadn't taken his focus off the sheets.

"What about unusual, divine subjects?"

"What topic?"

She hesitated. He hadn't immediately rejected her when she'd revealed her history with Serratura. But if he suspected why she was really here now, would he refuse to help her? She had to ask. For Myron. "Breaking a godstouch."

Trys peered at her, eyebrows raised. "What? I don't think that's possible."

Elia leaned on the table, bringing them a mere arm's length apart. "Maybe not. But if there was a scroll on the topic, could you find it?"

"Assuming it wasn't warded, yes." He glanced at her lips, and the hunger in his gaze heightened all her senses.

"Could you find it if it's in a warded vault?"

"I could try." He hadn't moved away from her. His warm breath slid over her skin and heated her to the core. "But I wouldn't without knowing why."

Elia put her hand on his arm, and he tensed under her touch but did not move away. "The night I agreed to bring you here and offered to come with you . . ." She gulped. Why was it so hard to tell him? "Well, that was right after my youngest brother became a Deathfate."

Trys's face was a study in genuine sympathy. He placed his hand over Elia's, and his thumb made slow, comforting circles on her wrist. "That's horrible. Dear gods, Elia, I'm so sorry." His warm touch sent gooseflesh up her arm. Was she breathing? "But what does that have to do with coming to Serratura?"

Her voice came out breathy. "Grivya, a hope witch I know, used her magic to show me that this library contains information about how to break a godstouch. I don't know anything more than that, but if you think there's any chance—"

"So that's your business here. I'd wondered why you'd risk coming, but I didn't want to jeopardize our agreement by prying." He pulled her hand closer, lacing their fingers together, and then said, "I'll find it."

“If the death priests discover that you helped me, I don’t know what they’ll do.”

He shook his head, keeping his eyes fixed on hers. “I’m not afraid of them. For all your help getting here, for your little brother, I’ll do what I can.” His dark brown eyes bored into her, and that same heat from earlier crept through her again. “I have what I need from this.”

Trys rewrapped the scroll in its binding and returned it to its shelf. He packed the parchment into his satchel.

“Give me your hand,” he said, holding out his right hand with a determined look. “Let’s look for the one you need.”

She shivered when her palm met his. Was that sensation magic or something else? Something more . . . personal? He licked his lips as he stared at their joined hands.

“Trys,” she whispered, “what are you—”

He interrupted her with a lyrical chant in a language she didn’t recognize, his smooth voice running over the notes like honey over buttered bread. His eyes slid closed, and he pulled her closer. His other hand grasped her shoulder, and her breath left her. Who knew Lore-mense magic was so intimate? When he opened his eyes, they had transformed into an enchanted, radiant green. He was breathtaking. Only inches separated them, and it would take nothing for her to close the distance between them and . . . and what? Kiss him? Hold him? Would he even want that? The chant ended and the green faded from his eyes, returning them to their familiar warm brown.

His brows knitted in a concerned apology. “I’m sorry, Elia. What you need is in a book in a vault beneath the library. We can’t get it until I can find a way to the entrance.”

“Oh, okay.” She breathed.

Neither of them moved for a moment.

“We’d better get out of here so I can study my notes and plan the next step.”

She nodded. “Of course.”

When he released her, the library felt too cold, and her hand tingled with the loss of his touch.

No one stopped them or asked questions as they left. They passed a few scholars in dark blue robes with gold stars speckled down the sides. But the scholars merely inclined their heads politely before returning to their

studies. Outside the library, Elia huffed deep breaths and allowed herself to shiver. They'd gotten away with . . . whatever Trys had just done.

He shouldered his bag and began descending the stairs back to street level. "Let's find a place to rest for the night. I'm sure you're tired, and I want to go over this new information."

Should she let him decide what the plan was? It seemed reasonable enough, but this was coming from someone who had learned ancient Serraturan before visiting a modern city.

She caught up and slipped her hand in his. Touching him was starting to become second nature. "Remember, *dear*, you're tragically mute."

He pursed his lips together and nodded, but his hand squeezed hers as if he had more to say.

OceanofPDF.com

14

Elia had to spend way too many coins from her little purse of unstamped gold to convince a back-alley innkeeper to rent them a room without any identification. He had frowned at her accent and her silent companion, so Elia let the gold do the talking. When enough coins rested in his palm, he no longer cared about his guests' particulars. The city was crowded with revelers from the country who came into town to spend the Nalani festival drinking and wooing. The innkeeper swore this was why he only had one room left, and when he handed her the key, he gave a half-apologetic shrug and hurried away to serve another guest.

Elia and Trys climbed four increasingly narrow flights of stairs to the attic, following the innkeeper's directions to their . . . Oh no. This was hardly a room. It was a converted storage space. Elia practically had to crawl through the door. The roof sloped so low over the space that they had to hunch in most of the room. All it contained was a single, narrow bed, a wobbly table, and a dresser with painted-shut drawers.

"Well, it's better than a tavern cellar," Trys said as he dropped his satchel on the bed.

Elia wrinkled her nose. "By what measure? There's only one bed!" Heat flared in her cheeks, and she glanced at him.

Trys had gone still, and that adorable deep blush crept up his neck. Adorable? When had his blush become *adorable*? She wanted to shake herself. He was going to get her killed—get them both killed—if she didn't keep her wits.

He cleared his throat. "Well, it's not like we're going to sleep much." Heat rushed over her whole body until he continued. "I need to study."

Oh. Of course that had been what he meant. Oblivious as ever, Trys began loudly rummaging through his satchel. The room was suddenly too stuffy and warm. Looking up, he stepped so close they were almost touching, and her skin pebbled in gooseflesh. He didn't try to move around her or make an excuse to back away. Something was about to happen. Elia

wasn’t sure what. A kiss? A declaration? Her whole body vibrated in anticipation.

“Could you, um, please, well, I need, um . . .” He trailed off helplessly. “I just . . . want to set this on the table.”

Table? Right, the table she was currently blocking. She winced and stepped aside. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he muttered.

She should get some air and clear her head. “I saw a food cart not too far from here. Would you like me to bring back dinner?”

“Please,” he said a little too quickly.

She ducked past him and practically ran from the room.

It took four tries to retrace the path to where she’d caught a glimpse of a particularly enticing cart. Bayla was Serratura’s other treasure besides the library. Elia often longed for the savory buns stuffed with hearty stew and topped with crispy brown cheese back home, but Isalindra had nothing even close. The scent of spicy stew and perfectly baked bread beckoned her from the alley next to a small green space where people gathered on blankets for an evening concert. A viol enchanter was showing off for the crowd before the main show began on the center platform. When he hit certain notes, lights appeared in various shapes and colors. Incandescent blue flowers bloomed in midair and then fizzled when the song moved on. Golden starbursts rained down over the crowd as he played, and they clapped furiously.

Her heart ached. She’d heard this song before, and it had meant something. Elia clawed at her memories but couldn’t place its significance.

She turned back to the cook and ordered her bayla. When she glanced up from her purse to pay for the buns, she noticed a framed gold token. Violetta. Her truest friend in Serratura. She’d danced to this song with Violetta, who had laughed and then shoved her toward potential dance partners. *Be brave, underlander. When you’re here, you must dance like one of us.*

Tears bubbled to the surface, and the vendor gave her a strange look. Elia swallowed her sorrow as she paid the cook and turned away. The memory faded as she lost sight of the framed token and Violetta’s profile. She couldn’t allow herself to be conspicuous.

Elia returned to their room with a paper tray laden with steaming food and stopped short. Maps and scrolls covered every surface. Books of history

and legends—and were those Serraturan fairy tales?—surrounded him in precarious little stacks. Trys had even found some way to pin papers to the walls. He was cross-legged on the floor, mumbling to himself. He grinned at her when she came in, and her breath caught.

“I think I’ve found something,” he announced. Then he sniffed. “That smells divine.”

Elia kicked the door shut. She nudged some of his papers aside with her toe, clearing a spot for the tray.

“Hope you’re hungry. Prince Trys of Isalindra, allow me to present bayla, a finer food than you’d find on most Isalindran noble tables.”

He rolled his eyes and smiled back at her, flashing that roguish dimple. “Famished. But that’s tall praise.”

Elia plopped down beside him and passed him a warm bayla. He tentatively nibbled it as she tore into her own bun.

His brows lifted. “Oh, that’s good!”

She grinned. “I told you. I miss these so much I dream about them sometimes.”

He studied her, a soft smile illuminating his face. “I’m going to find a recipe for these and have them made every day when we get home.”

“Because you like them that much?” She laughed.

“Because you do.” He met her gaze, smile solidifying into something more serious. “I want you to smile like that all the time. I want you to be happy with me.”

She swallowed. “Oh.” A fluttery feeling consumed her chest.

After a pause, he continued. “But first, the mission. I’m excited to show you what I found while you were out. It’s so interesting,” he said around an enormous dribbling bite.

A bit of the sauce lingered near the corner of his mouth. Just as he was about to start speaking, she reached out and wiped the sauce with her finger. Then she realized what she’d done. Runa help her. It was a reflex. She did it to Myron all the time. But now she’d done it to Trys. A prince. Her betrothed. Definitely not her eight-year-old brother. Perhaps she should find the horizon and jump. It would probably be less embarrassing.

Trys’s eyes went wide. The stew dripped from Elia’s finger pad down to her knuckle. How was she supposed to get rid of it? What did normal people do in moments like these? She popped her finger in her mouth and licked the stew off. His mouth parted in a silent *oh*. Without taking his eyes

off her, he slowly lifted his hand. The space between them was charged with an energy unlike anything she'd known. Something almost like magic. She looked down.

A napkin. He was handing her a napkin. Oh. Right. *That* was what normal people did. Her stomach dropped and heat rushed to her cheeks. Maybe the gods of sky and day would let her walk into the sun.

She let out a laugh that was way too high-pitched. "Wouldn't want to waste good bayla."

He cleared his throat. "Right. Naturally."

Maybe a hole could open in the floor of this cursed inn and swallow her. Another beat of silence passed. Her thoughts were so slow, like they were filtered through oatmeal. What had they been talking about? Research. Scrolls. Something like that? Runa spare her.

Keeping her eyes determinedly on the wall over his shoulder, she said, "So, um, your findings?"

He retracted the offered napkin and fidgeted with it. "Ah. Yes. When we were in the library, I copied a letter that talks about the Scroll of Peace. I was in the middle of translating it when you arrived. The Serraturan is a dialect I haven't encountered. But I almost have it figured out."

"Need any help?" She needed to keep busy. Focusing on their respective missions might keep her from utterly humiliating herself. Again.

Trys gave a short laugh and then glanced up at her. "Oh. You were serious? Sorry. I, well, uh—" He twisted his tunic in his hands. "You're illiterate, so I'm not really sure what you could do."

The nerve! Heat flared in her cheeks. "I'm not illiterate, you absolute menace. I don't read *Serraturan*. I'm perfectly capable in Valdanese."

He put up his hands in defense. "Sorry, sorry. I'm sure if this letter was in Valdanese, you'd be a great help. But since it's not, maybe just try to be quiet while I work."

"Says the dummy who can't talk to any Serraturans because he learned the wrong language." Elia snatched a pillow from the bed and threw it at his head.

Trys caught it out of the air. "Says the dummy who's now short a pillow." His grin turned mischievous. "I might give it back if you ask very nicely."

"It's not very gentlemanly to steal a lady's pillow."

"I'm not feeling very gentlemanly right now, actually."

Between the twinkle in his eyes and the way he kept staring at her lips, they were treading dangerous territory. He shook his head and glanced back down at his scattered notes on the floor.

“Be patient, my sweet Conjurista.” He paused to wink—he actually winked at her—before saying, “I’m sure you’ll unlock a way to help at some point.”

She groaned. “Did you really just make a key pun? Maybe I need to rethink this marriage.”

Trys tossed the pillow back at her, and she caught it right before it hit her face. Elia groaned and plopped onto the bed to wait. And wait. And wait. Half an hour passed, and he was still immersed in inscrutable scrolls. Elia was going to lose her mind if she didn’t find something productive to do, and soon. She’d tried to act as his assistant, but thus far, her help had included not touching that, and not touching that either, and handing him scrolls that were closer to her side of the tiny room. It was so cramped in here. Between the musty odor of old scrolls and onions from their dinner, it could have smelled better too. The window was painted shut. And propping open the door would mean exposing the loose papers to unexpected drafts from the corridor. So she was trapped and supposed to sit still and just quietly think her very loud thoughts.

“I think I’ll take a walk,” she said. Her disguise had worked well so far. No one had recognized her all day.

“Thank the gods,” he muttered, and seemed to realize he’d said it aloud. “I mean, uh, enjoy yourself. And don’t get captured.”

The moon had begun its descent toward the western horizon when she returned. It was a lovers’ moon, milky and obscured by a thin veil of clouds. Like a pale bride. Perfect for stolen kisses and secret glances during the Nalani festival, which was in full swing throughout the city.

In their dingy inn room, a different kind of amorous thieving was happening—the patient, loving extrication of secrets from ancient texts. Elia had worked out the perfect joke about that, but when she opened the door to their room, Trys grinned up at her again, his smile painfully infectious. It pushed out every other thought she had except those full lips.

“I found it,” he declared. “It was so obvious once I decoded Trillian the Gray’s final letter to Malbius the Eighth.”

“The what to who? What?” She entered carefully, tiptoeing around his stacks of notes.

His face lit up with a teacher’s enthusiasm. “Five centuries ago, Trillian the Gray was a general of the Panethosian self-defense army.” Seeing her confused look, he paused and ran his fingers through his very soft-looking hair before continuing. “The ancient Panethos islands were later consumed by the Ortagan Empire, and they lost their country name. But that’s neither here nor there. Up until Trillian’s time, the Scroll of Peace was housed in a highly guarded temple somewhere on the main island. Trillian feared conquest decades before it actually happened, and he worried that the empire would try to destroy the scroll. So, he begged King Malbius the Eighth of Serratura to put it in one of their famed vaults.”

“Why didn’t he use the scroll to stop the empire?”

“His letter avoids that point.” When she looked at his face, alight with the wonder of discovery and rewarded study, she couldn’t help but draw closer to him. “It was like it never even occurred to him. Can you imagine?”

She could not imagine that, but she *could* imagine finger-combing Trys’s curly locks and pulling his face closer to hers. But something was missing from Trys’s point. “If conquest was coming, if an empire was about to consume them, why *not* use a war-ending tool?” Conquest was death and destruction in a thousand different ways. The only reason not to use the scroll was that it was somehow worse.

Trys waved away her concerns. “It’s likely the gods of Panethos forbade its use. They had different ones than we do, you know. The fact that it was in a temple means that it was under a god’s protection. Or perhaps Trillian knew that stopping a war with the Ortagans wouldn’t mean an end to their atrocities. They were a brutal, if short-lived, empire.”

“So how does that discovery help us now?”

He grinned again, and gods help her, that dimple was going to be the death of her. “King Malbius’s response describes a secret stair in the center of the library that will take us to the vault that houses the Scroll of Peace. Cross-referencing other scrolls about the library’s history, I found the stairs’ location. And if I’m not mistaken, it should lead to the vault you need as well.”

Yes, that smile was absolutely going to kill her. Because there was no ordinary circumstance where she’d descend a secret stair to a forbidden

vault in a city where she’d been banished on pain of death. But Myron needed that rite. She had to follow through. Elia was going to follow Trys into the belly of the library.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” She hoped her light tone hid the gravity and anxiety that threatened to crush her.

OceanofPDF.com

15

They returned to the library in the deepest part of the night. No one lingered in the Center of Learning or the passages near the entrance. Even the library's magical lemurs slept peacefully in their stack-end beds. The air was dry and pleasantly warm. Almost as if the library was glad of the late-night company.

After several twists and turns and what felt like an hour of walking, Trys stopped in front of a black metal door. He ran his fingers over the raised inscription and nodded.

"This is it," he said. "The stairwell to the forbidden floors below." Trys took Elia's hand and gave a gentle smile. "You should just wait here where it's safer. I can search for both our vaults and then come back for you. If I'm not back by dawn, go somewhere safe and stay hidden."

The thought of waiting quietly while he descended into the unknown made her stomach twist. Besides . . . "You just found a secret door to forbidden vaults in a library that's open to the public. Do you *really* think it will be unlocked? Go ahead. Try to open it."

He scowled and tried the handle, and of course, the door wouldn't budge. It took him longer than it should have to remember who he was with.

"You can unlock this, can't you?" he muttered.

"I can unlock *anything*." She studied the lock. Ugh. She was going to have to do this one the hard way. "But since this lock is more complex, the method is a bit . . . embarrassing." Heat rose to her cheeks. "I'd rather not. Is there another way to the vaults?"

He'd seen her use this method once before. When she'd unlocked the Trove of Beleor in front of Salvius and his little band of perverted scholars, Elia hadn't cared what they'd thought of her or her work. But now, with so much on the line, with Trys watching her so intently, hope and something else—something she wasn't quite ready to name—sparking in his eyes . . . Elia found she suddenly cared very much about his opinion of her.

His eyebrows lifted. “Another way? I spent hours deciphering ancient texts to find this entrance. And you want me to come up with something to save your pride?”

“Oh, and you were going to leave me alone in a foreign library where I can’t read anything so you could just walk through an unlocked door, prance down the stairs, somehow open a definitely locked vault, and read a mythical scroll that absolutely has *no* sort of binding magic on it? Was that your plan? Hmm?”

“I would *never* prance in a library,” he said, affronted. “Just unlock the door before someone notices us lingering here.”

“Ah yes, in this crowded library in the dead of night.” Elia crossed her arms and tried to stall. “Maybe if you ask me nicely instead of like an entitled prince, I’ll think about it.”

He closed his eyes and pressed his thumb and forefinger over the bridge of his nose. Then he captured her hands in his and pressed his fingers into her palms. What was he doing? He leaned in until his face was inches from hers. His warm breath tickled her lips. What in the names of all the gods? Heat flared in her cheeks. She took a step back, but he moved with her until she was pressed against the cold metal door.

“Elia, dearest, most talented Conjurista alive,” Trys said, dropping his rich baritone to a deeper, rumbling pitch that heated her blood, and a glint of mischief brightening his eyes, “my future wife, would you do me the honor of unlocking this door so I can proceed with my quest? I would be eternally grateful for your assistance.”

Her heartbeat drummed a wild rhythm in her ears. Hopefully, he couldn’t hear it. This close, his intoxicating scent wrapped her in its own embrace. She couldn’t stop her deep inhale. Was Prince Smudge trying to seduce her into unlocking the door? Did he actually *want* her? He was a prince. Her client. But also . . . her betrothed. There was no way he was sincere. He had to be teasing her. Well, two could play this game. She’d call his bluff, and then she’d unlock this stupid door and kick his sorry rear down those forbidden stairs.

Elia tilted her chin down and looked up at him through her lashes. She smiled and placed her index finger on his lips. He stiffened in surprise. Good.

She slid her finger down his chest as she dropped to her knees. “Anything for you, my prince,” she said in a silky bedroom voice.

For a moment, she relished the shock and raw desire on his face. Served him right for taunting her.

“Wh-What are you doing?” he rasped, staggering back a step.

She gave her naughtiest smile. “Fulfilling your request, Your Highness.”

Then she twisted around toward the door and placed her hand over the keyhole. As she’d suspected, this lock was complicated. She couldn’t do it by feel alone. She closed her eyes and began softly humming an incantation of revelation. The shape of the lock blurred into her consciousness. Not good enough. She needed the key to fit exactly. Otherwise, they risked triggering an alarm or trap or whatever creative security measures the ancient Serraturans had devised.

Elia moved her face closer to the keyhole and inhaled the scent of wood and metal. The image sharpened a bit. Still not enough. She moved even closer to the keyhole, her lips grazing the opening. Teasing Trys had helped embolden her, but his hovering presence still heightened her self-consciousness. Elia closed her eyes in a weak attempt to shut him out as she slid her tongue into the keyhole, never breaking the tune of the incantation. Every ridge and angle of the inner lock mechanism exploded in her mind. A perfect map of the lock laid bare, she changed her tune and began the summoning incantation. Her mouth filled with the taste of silver. The ridges of the new key formed along her tongue.

Finally, she finished the incantation and stood, back to the prince. She turned to face him and nearly laughed at his slack jaw.

He cleared his throat and shoved a hand through his curls. “I, uh, forgot how that looked when you, um, do the, um . . . so, did it work?”

Elia playfully stepped forward. Only a few inches separated them. She considered transferring the key to his mouth just to tease him more. No. It would have been much too close to a kiss. But she could still taunt him a little.

He tensed, and before he moved away, she parted her lips to reveal the silver key resting on her tongue. Never breaking eye contact, she tilted toward him and opened her mouth, letting the key fall from her tongue into her open palm. Then she pressed the wet key into his hand and stepped back, unable to keep a cocky smile off her face.

“What in Nalani’s name?” he choked, nearly dropping the key.

Elia had to hold her hand over her mouth to contain her laughter, but her whole body trembled with the effort.

He glowered at her. “That was unnecessary. You could have just handed it to me. I thought you wanted to kiss me.”

Moving away from the door so he could unlock it, she winked at him. “Who says I don’t, *lover*?”

Trys didn’t smile or move to open the door. His face was unreadable as he stepped closer.

“Well, that would have been a terrible first kiss. There would have been a key in the way.” He slid an arm around her waist, and her heart skipped a beat as he drew her close. With his body pressed tight against hers, Trys’s voice rumbled through her when he said, “Next time, make a better attempt.”

Her breath caught, and she froze.

When she didn’t respond, he drew back and released her. “I’m sorry.” He must have thought she was going to protest because he held up his hand and continued quickly. “You don’t have to say anything.” His cheeks flushed crimson. “I’ll stand by my promise to keep our agreement to business only. I’ll keep my distance from now on.”

Distance wasn’t what she wanted. The warmth of his hands lingered on her waist, and her whole body thrilled with newly awakened excitement. Maybe the Nalani festival was rattling her. Or maybe it was just him, just Trys, lighting up her every nerve.

Elia opened her mouth, unsure of what she was about to say.

But before she could speak, Trys held up the key and said, “Let’s stay focused and see this through.”

The descent into the dark unknown would have been much more frightening if Elia hadn’t just come so close to kissing Trys. She waved an arm to sweep away a sprawling cobweb with a giant, fuzzy red spider dangling over the next step. How was she supposed to *stay focused* when she could still feel his body against hers? She kicked some kind of bone—a femur?—over the edge of the stairs. It fell into a yawning chasm that probably should have terrified her, and it was several seconds before it clattered somewhere far below.

Trys’s shoulders stiffened ahead of her. “Could you refrain from disturbing whatever is lurking down there?”

Couldn’t he at least pretend he was struggling with whatever was happening between them? Had he really moved on from the moment, just

like that?

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Stop that. Seriously.”

She silently mimicked him to his back.

The tiny library lantern wasn’t meant to handle this cavernous darkness, and it barely illuminated the next step as they descended. Trys glanced nervously behind them every few minutes.

“Why do you keep looking back?” Elia finally asked. She peered back into an endless expanse of complete black.

“I can’t shake the feeling that we’re being watched,” he whispered.

From what little Elia knew of the Great Library, that was likely true. Though there weren’t always humans in the library, it was never empty of creatures. Trys gave a barely stifled shriek and flailed his arms as he tripped down a step.

“What?” she hissed.

“My hand brushed against something. S-Something warm and furry!”

Elia held the lantern up, and a very flustered bat flinched away from the glow. “It’s just a bat.”

“Just?!”

“Hush. You’ll alert someone to our presence if you keep going on. Sound travels quickly down here.” She paused to appreciate his glower. “Besides, bats are cute and harmless. Just leave them alone, and they’ll leave you alone.”

“Cursed cave vermin,” he muttered as he continued down the stairs. “I really hate the dark. If I could just see them ahead of time—”

“If you could see them, it wouldn’t be dark, and they wouldn’t be here.”

“Thank you, Master Scholar,” he quipped.

Fine. If he wanted a fight, she’d be glad to deliver.

“Oh, excuse me, *Prince* Scholar. I believed after studying the maps of this place, it’d be obvious that we’re descending into a subbasement that is likely full of bats, rats, cave snakes, and anything else that shuns the light.”

“Cave snakes?”

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid of them too.”

“I’m not *afraid*; I just strongly dislike them. There’s nothing strange about enmity with those legless slithering demons.”

She snorted. “So they’re demons, but how about spiders?”

“Creepy-crawly demons.”

“Bats?”

“Flying demons.”

Elia had to press her fist to her mouth to hold in her laughter. “What kind of libraries are you visiting that have no pests?”

The slope of the stairs had started to level out, and the ceiling lifted gradually. They were nearing the bottom.

“Ones with servants. And the facilities management team at my estate does an excellent job of warding the manor against unwanted critters.”

“Must be nice.” Even in her merchant district of Isalindra, occasional spiders and mice were normal.

“You’ll find out soon enough.” She could hear the smile in his voice. “Watch out. I think I just stepped on something . . . crunchy.”

Even in the dim glow of the tiny lantern, Elia could see how taut Trys’s shoulders were and how stiffly he walked. Poor prince. She was tempted to lean forward and blow on his neck. But he’d probably fall down the stairs and ruin everything. Still, she couldn’t help laughing at the idea of him cringing at spiders.

“What’s so funny?” he asked. “Are you laughing at *me*?”

Absolutely. “Never, Your Highness.”

The corridor forked again and again, and each time, Trys complained about having to take the tighter, darker passage. At least the floor was smooth. At some point, their hands had clasped in the dark. Elia wasn’t sure who had reached out first, but her hand felt so right in his. She stroked the inside of his palm with her thumb just to make him twitch. He shivered and gripped her hand harder.

Occasional vents in the ceiling allowed cool air to circulate in from the outside. They passed strange doors with intricate locks and carved frames. Stifling magic pressed in on Elia. The vaults almost seemed haunted. Eerie whining, rustling, and clanking echoed behind some doors.

On that awful night, the plague scroll’s vault had been restless too. Elia wrapped her free arm around her stomach and prayed Trys didn’t select an active vault. But he didn’t stop. It must have been hours since they’d entered the forbidden descent, but it was impossible to tell in the deep bowels of the library. Time meant nothing in the undisturbed darkness.

Trys turned when a narrow path veered to their right, eyes glowing green with enchantment again. He hummed a strange Lore-mense incantation as they walked, still hand in hand. After a few moments, he

stopped before a door covered in rows and rows of locks. Number locks, key locks, dead bolts. There must have been a dozen. His eyebrows rose.

“Whatever you need is in this vault.” He paused to study the locks. “Looks like you have your work cut out for you, Conjurista.”

She smiled at him. “It’s nothing, *Prince* Smudge.” She licked her finger and wiped at a dirt stain on his painted cheek. He went still and stared at her. “If it’s not ink stains on your nose, it’s dirt on your cheek. What would the other nobles say?”

He wrinkled his nose and snorted. “Probably that the filth matches the shame I’ve brought to my family by not avenging my brother’s death in battle.”

A pang went through her heart. They both carried the weight of so much regret, so much guilt.

Her thumb caressed his cheek where she’d wiped the dirt. “They’d be proud of you if they knew your current ambition. It takes a lot of bravery to seek out the scroll.”

Elia turned back to the door and pressed her hand against the locks. No magic. Just normal, everyday locks. Child’s play. Trys lingered for a moment, watching her, but Elia didn’t dare turn around to see what his expression was. She needed to concentrate. For Myron.

OceanofPDF.com

16

The unlocked vault smelled like parchment, ink, and old wood. But it looked exactly as it had in the hope vision Grivya had given her. An enchanted everlantern brightened as Trys pulled her into the vault, humming a Lore-mense incantation. Several shelves of scrolls, a cylindrical container of old swords gone dull with years of disuse, paintings depicting various battle scenes, and portraits, vials, and clutter—all were haphazardly strewn about the vault, as though the owner didn't care about the contents but just wanted to store them out of sight.

A large oak table took up the center of the room. The everlantern hovered above it, casting a golden glow on a pedestal in the middle of the table. Trys stopped humming in front of a massive tome with cracked leather binding and gilded pages. The same one from her vision. He hefted the book from its shelf and carried it to the table. It had to be ancient based on the yellowing paper. It almost seemed to call to Elia, beckoning to be read.

"A grimoire," he breathed. "A book infused with arcane enchantments is a truly rare find. According to my magic, the information you need is here."

He continued his chant, and after a few seconds, several pages in the grimoire shone in such bright gold that light poured through the whole vault.

Trys smiled victoriously. "Let's see what we've got."

He turned the delicate pages with a pair of tongs. The grimoire was alive with movement. Ink scrambled about the pages, rearranging into new designs and shapes every time he turned a page. Lines of text ran chaotically this way and that, as if it couldn't decide on a language or alphabet. Finally, Trys reached one of the illuminated pages. The ink had settled into a recognizable alphabet and structure, but Elia didn't know any of the words.

"Interesting. Looks like this grimoire is written in ancient Serraturan. Imagine that." He smirked at her as he withdrew a small stack of scholar sheets from his satchel. The iridescent shimmer on its surface hinted at its

enchantment. “We’ll use these to copy the information and translate it into Valdanese for you.”

Trys sang an incantation every time he pressed a sheet to the glowing grimoire pages. His baritone voice gave the magical words a soothing liquid sound. She could have listened to him sing all night.

“Your voice is lovely.” Elia couldn’t stop herself from blurting it out.

He paused and glanced at her, clearing his throat. “Thanks. I, um, am almost done. This is the last page.” He carefully laid the sheets across the table. “While we wait for them to dry, I’ll read directly from the grimoire.” Trys took a moment to peruse the luminous pages, and as he read, his face grew steadily paler. “Elia,” he breathed, and her name sounded like honey on his tongue. “This is so dangerous.” He set the grimoire down and his eyes filled with bleak sadness. “I’ll cut right to the point. Myron can only be restored through great peril and cost.”

“Anything is better than letting him go on as a Deathfate.”

“These pages describe an ancient rite that can remove a godstouch if performed correctly. But a single mistake could mean your death or his.”

Elia bounced on her toes. This was the exact information she needed. Gods bless Grivya and her hope magic for leading Elia here. “Any godstouch? Even one from Morthanos? He’s one of the great ancients. One of the three most powerful gods. Can the rite remove his touch?”

“Did you miss the part where I said you would die?”

“No, but I assumed *that* was a risk. What does the rite involve?”

Trys grimaced and continued. “You must take a piece of the victim. Blood, hair, teeth. It doesn’t matter. Some part of Myron. And, well, this part is curious. You need the blood of a great harbinger of the god whose touch you want to break.”

“A what?” Elia bent closer over the grimoire to look at the rippling words.

A sharp intake of breath had her glancing back up at Trys. She’d moved into his personal space, leaving only a sliver of air between them. What was she doing getting this close to him? She straightened but misjudged the angle, and their faces collided, nose to nose. Any thoughts of teasing vanished. Neither of them moved.

His eyes widened, enhancing the amber and green flecks in the alluring brown. His lips were so close. And the way he was looking at her. Like she

was water in the desert. Like she was a rare and precious thing that would vanish if he blinked. She shivered.

He leaned toward her slightly, and this time she couldn't stop herself from closing the distance to him. Their lips met. His mouth was so soft against hers. His hands pressed against her back, pulling her closer. More. She needed more. Her arms circled his neck. She parted her lips and moaned as his tongue caressed hers. He tasted like butterscotch and salt and something she couldn't quite name. It was lazy summer afternoons and warm sunshine. It was enchanted elixirs and the promise of so much more if she lost herself in him. His fingers tangled in her hair and tugged, making her scalp tingle.

A rattle echoed down the corridor. They broke the kiss and gaped at each other in surprise. It was time to run for it. But . . . their arms remained locked in embrace.

He pressed his forehead against hers and sighed. "I've wanted to do that since the first moment I saw you, Conjurista."

She should say something. Anything. *I've wanted the same. I thought you were out of my reach. An untouchable prince fit only for noble lovers.* But she was breathless and flustered, and he felt so good against her. She couldn't speak and shatter the moment.

Voices. Gruff male voices. Several of them. Runa save her; the Serraturans were going to catch them breaking into the vaults. Elia's heart fell through the floor. They broke apart, and Trys grasped her wrist.

"We need to go." He tugged her toward the door.

Elia picked up the pages, folded them, and tucked them into a hidden pocket in her skirt. As she turned to the door, she bumped the tongs and softly swore as they hit the floor. Hopefully the clang didn't give away their location.

"Do you know where to find the vault for the Scroll of Peace?" Her voice came out high-pitched and breathy, but he didn't appear to notice.

"Yes, but we need to hurry. This way." He grabbed her hand and pulled her through dark corridors that branched and branched again.

The voices faded behind them, and there seemed to be no sign of pursuit. The passages grew tighter, the darkness heavier with the weight of binding magic. The vaults in this section were thickly warded, the doors pulsing with intense spells and enchanted locks.

Finally, they turned down a corridor that ended in an iron alcove. The floor and ceiling were engraved with spelled scriptwork. And the door itself —Elia went rigid—it could only have been made by a divine binding master.

“This is it,” Trys whispered reverently.

Of course it was. The door hummed with magic and mystery. A deep sense of foreboding sank into her.

Elia inhaled sharply. “Can you feel the spellwork in this place? It’s laced with menace and crafted with extreme skill. We should be careful.”

Trys dropped his satchel and handed the lantern to Elia as he stepped forward to inspect the door. She gripped the lantern and prayed to every god of shadow and secrets that no one would find them.

OceanofPDF.com

17

To a normal person, the vault door would have appeared dull iron in the torchlight. But Elia's Conjurista eyes were attuned to the faint tracery of binding spells. They thrummed just above the surface of the door. A warning vibrated, pitched to instill fear. Trys reached out his hand.

"Don't touch it," Elia said more sharply than she meant to. She softened her tone. "It's bound with curses, warnings, and locking spells."

He dropped his hand. "Can you undo them?"

She examined the lockwork. A master had done this. Or perhaps several masters working together. It felt familiar. Some of the lines and layers reminded her of the work that had been done on the miasmic memory plague scroll. The hairs on the back of her neck rose.

"Trys, are you *certain* this Scroll of Peace is what you say it is?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Are you doubting my scholarship?"

Normally, she might have taken this opportunity to tease him about the merits of his scholarship. But the ominous energy emanating from the door chilled her to the core.

She shook her head. "It's just that this binding looks familiar. In a bad way. It's very similar to the binding that contained the curse-scroll. I don't want to unlock another disaster."

"Masters often use the same incantation patterns, right?" He shrugged. "They were probably locked away by the same people or disciples of the same masters. My research was very clear that this is a normal storage vault. We aren't anywhere near the other curse-vaults."

She ran her finger along the outer layer of curselocks. Nausea swept over her. It was not going to be easy to open these. To unlock them all properly—so they could be left locked with no evidence of tampering when Elia and Trys were done—she'd need several key Conjurors working in tandem. But it was just her. So, she'd have to sever the magic binding the locks and wards, leaving most of them unusable afterward. The next passerby would know someone had been there.

“Trys, these bindings will test the limit of my skill. It’s going to take *everything* I have to unlock them. If I can even do it, I’ll be spent when it’s over. Promise me you’ll run if the scroll, or whatever is behind that door, is dangerous. Leave me if I can’t keep up.”

His brows shot up to his hairline. “No. Of course not! How could I?”

“Oh, okay. Then are you going to carry me? You may be strong, but we walked down the stairs for hours to get here. If I can’t move, how will you get me out?”

His jaw set and he looked away, glowering. Stupid, lovely prince. He was going to be stubborn about this. “I’ll stay with you until you can move.”

“No. I will *not* go through the gate and spend my days in the realm of the dead with your life on my conscience. Furthermore, someone needs to take care of my siblings. One of us needs to make it back to Isalindra for them. Promise me you’ll run. Promise me you’ll take care of my family if I don’t leave this place. Give me your word or I’ll refuse to unlock the vault.”

He looked away miserably. After a moment, he exhaled. “Fine. I swear on my honor to take care of your family. But I’ll only leave you if there is no other option.”

“Good. Now back away. Some of the locks could snap out as I break them.”

“Break them? I thought you’d unlock them.”

“Unlocking all this intricate work would take days and a team of Conjurors. I’m going to unlock the ones I can and break the others. After you read it, we’re going to have to leave the scroll behind an unlocked door.”

Trys’s lips pursed together in objection, but he only said, “Do what you must.”

Then he took several paces down the corridor and pressed his back against the opposite wall. Good. He’d have even more of a head start if this went poorly. She hummed a destructive tune and pulled deeply on her magic to conjure a key-sword. Just as she had the night she’d released the memory plague. The music of the spell vibrated through her bones and rattled her teeth as she summoned. After a few moments, a heavy silver hilt materialized in her hand. The serrated arm-length blade followed quickly after, shimmering with silvery enchantment. Elia tested the key-sword’s

weight in her hands. It was the only magical tool strong enough to damage the bindings on this door.

If conjuring keys created a satisfying sense of wholeness and completion, severing locks was its opposite. It unsettled her emotionally and physically until she wasn't sure how her own nerves held together in her body. She prayed to every god of sky and earth, wind and sea that the Scroll of Peace would be all Trys had hoped for and more. That it wouldn't kill them.

The cursechains across the door gleamed, and the warnings changed pitch to a high shriek. Hopefully only she could hear it, and it wasn't some kind of alarm. She poured her magic into the key-sword, filling and refilling it. Bits of it broke off and evanesced as she hacked at the cursechains. She attacked them over and over until her arms ached with the effort of swinging the sword. The chains clinked on the floor, barely audible over the shrill alarm. When they finally fell away completely, the cursework converged into a single massive lock. A truelock. Only a highly ranked master could conjure the key for that. But she was still going to try.

Breathing hard, she wiped the sweat from her brow and dissolved the key-sword. Her arms ached, her knees wobbled, and her vision blurred. Her magic was already approaching its limit. Elia motioned for Trys to approach. He was staring awestruck at her. Like he'd never seen anything like her. He needed to pay attention if they were going to make it out of here.

"This is the part where you get ready to run if necessary," she rasped. "This lock is impossible for all but the most skilled Conjurors. If I manage to open this vault, I'll be useless to you afterward. I've already used most of my magic, and unlocking this will deplete the rest. When I'm done, open the door just enough to see the scroll. If it moves, run. If it glows, run. If the ink shifts at all—"

"Run. I get it. But only if there's no other choice." He put a hand on her shoulder, and heat flared in her neck. "I'm not running unless I know you're okay. I won't leave you unconscious and alone down here."

Before she could argue, he moved back to let her work. Elia pressed her forehead to the glowing amber truelock. The pulse of its warning beat into her skin. The ridges of the cursescript indented her face. It was so much more complex than unlocking the door at the top of the library stairs. She pressed her lips to the lock's opening and poured her magic into the

keyhole. Her tongue swept into the lock mechanism. A vision of the inner lock filled her mind, and her magic strained against curses to make a key. The lock lapped up her energy like a thirsty dog. It was taking too much. Had the lock turned red? She tried to pull back but couldn't. The lock held her fast.

"Elia," Trys shouted, but she waved him off. He needed to stay back.

Every nerve in her body was on fire. Thousands of invisible tiny swords stabbed her inside and out. Each time the pain pulsed, more of her vitality drained. The corridor tilted and the furiously glowing lock blurred in and out of view. Somewhere in the recesses of Elia's memory, Rinna-Grivya warned her about the danger of certain curses.

Some things were never meant to be unbound, Rinna-Grivya had said, her thin voice crackling with foreboding. *For some locks, we should be grateful they hold.*

But no lock had ever held against her magic. And now she was going to pay for it. Trys was going to pay for it. She couldn't even warn him. Not with the lock siphoning her life away and a strange key forming on her tongue. Its ridges were like sharp razors. When the lock finally let her go, the metallic tang of blood filled her mouth. Elia spat the newly made key into her hand, along with a palmful of blood. The now-crimson lock still glowed. Waiting. Humming just for her. Crimson for curses, perhaps. Trys had reassured her this was a normal storage vault, but what if he was wrong?

Dread pooled in Elia's stomach as she glowered at the awful key of blades. Her tongue and cheeks stung with the toll it had exacted. Cuts along her gums and the walls of her mouth, slices on her tongue. There was no point in wiping the key clean before inserting it in the lock. The blood had been taken for a reason. The price of entry.

She inserted the key and watched, swaying from exhaustion, as the lock absorbed her blood. Trys was beside her in a heartbeat. He eased her to the floor against the corridor wall across from the door.

"Foolish prince," she mumbled through blood and spit as he wiped her forehead and mouth with his handkerchief. His hands were so warm. "Beautiful foolish prince. Crimson is a warning."

As he helped her settle, Trys kissed the top of her forehead, and even in her drained state, his cool lips set fire to her skin. His eyes were alight with a proud gleam, his lips curved into a triumphant grin. She should insist that

he run, but . . . that grin. The triumph gleaming in his eyes. She could drink that smile like the sweetest healing elixir. She wanted to grab his face and pull his mouth to hers. She wanted his lips on hers with his arms holding her. She wanted . . . she wanted *everything* from him. But he was already looking back at the perilous vault. Her skin bristled with warning. She coughed and tried to speak but no sound came out.

"Shh." He helped her adjust into a slightly more comfortable position. "I *knew* you could do it. I'm so grateful to you, Elia. I never could have done this alone. Thank you." He squeezed her hand. "It's finally time for me to end the war and bring peace to our people." Trys tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. His eyes raked over her with a worried expression. "I'll get you out of here as soon as I can. We'll go home where you can rest and let me take care of you." He glanced at the vault behind him and then met her eyes. His were so full of hope and victory. "This will all be over soon."

Her unease blossomed into a palpable weight in her chest. She should stop him, but she was too weak to even lift a finger. He placed her hands back on her lap, brushing his thumb over her knuckles before letting go. Her head lolled against the cool stone.

Trys walked to the lock, turned the key, and strained to pull the door open. Its rusty hinges squealed and screamed. The severed cursechains screamed at Elia. Trys's profile blurred at the edges and the corridor wavered in her vision.

Elia fought to keep conscious. She blinked. The door was open. Another blink. A pale scroll sat alone on a table with no further bindings. Thank the gods. And yet . . . the warning wails clanged with every scrape of the cursechains against the wall. The lock was still radiating a menacing red.

Another blink and Trys was reading the scroll. His deep voice chanted the singsong words of a spell. The words echoed in the cell. He named Valdan in the chant. Did she imagine that the walls shuddered? Was that crack in the floor growing?

Drumming in the distance. Or was it marching? Another blink and Trys was holding the scroll aloft, continuing his rhythmic chant. Was that ancient Serraturan? It had been useful twice over today. She'd have to eat all of her teasing words later.

Her head dropped to her chest, and it took several agonizing seconds to lift it again. She forced her eyes open one last time. The ink was lifting

from the scroll and flying toward Trys. The characters stuck to his skin like black tattoos. That couldn’t be good, could it?

A man with a gruff voice shouted in Serraturan, but she was too tired to translate. What was he so mad about? The shouting continued as a gray haze crept around the edges of her vision. Was this the end? Was she going to pass into Morthanos’s realm without saving Myron?

Elia tried to move, but the corridor spun wildly. Someone swore as a wave of nausea overtook her. Before she could try to move again, the darkness finally crashed in. As Elia’s consciousness faded, she had the vague sensation of rough fingers yanking at her arms.

OceanofPDF.com

18

When Elia woke, her senses were still muddy from the intense magic drain. Her head swam as she tried to order her thoughts. She blinked her surroundings into focus. She was sprawled on a clean floor on top of a pile of fresh hay in a Serraturan prison cell. The heavy wooden cell door had a small, barred window that allowed dim yellow light to illuminate the dark room.

Failed. She had failed Trys by getting captured. She would not be bringing him back safely as promised. This whole trip had been a waste, and now it was going to cost her everything. How would her family find out what happened to her? Who would help Myron now? The thought sank into her like invisible talons ripping into her sides. He would be lost.

Someone was screaming nearby. Not just someone. Trys. Dear gods of the skies, the sounds he made were inhuman. Where was he? She tried to stand, but her body was too heavy.

“Just end it! Kill me! Please, for the love of all the gods! Kill me now!” he screamed.

Numbness weighed down her legs when she tried to rock forward and stand. Her mouth burned where it had been cut by the key. Trys’s agonized wails echoed off the walls. She had to get to him, or at least close enough to see him. She belly-crawled, arm over arm, to the wall of her cell. Where was he? Were they torturing him? That was unlike the Serraturans. They were fair and swift with their punishments and disliked unnecessary bloodshed.

“I want to go home,” he sobbed, and then let out a blood-curdling scream.

Elia’s nails dug into the cell door’s dark wood. There had to be a lock. She’d open it and go to him. By sheer force of will, she gripped the cold, iron window bars. Every nerve in her body ignited in pain. The slightest movement sent waves of agony over her, but she forced herself to stand, even if only for a moment. Her breath came in desperate heaves.

Elia peered through the bars. The hallway was blessedly deserted, but she was sure there were guards nearby. Trys's screams echoed in the corridor, but she couldn't see which cell he was in. She had to get to him. Running her fingers over the cool brass of the lock on her prison door, Elia studied the mechanism. It seemed simple enough to conjure a key for it. Would they really put her in a cell she could just walk out of? Elia rested her head against the door. A low hum vibrated gently in the wood. An intricate binding spell. There was no way she could break it without triggering an alarm that would summon every guard nearby.

Trys screamed again, and his agony pierced her heart. She had to try. Elia reached for her magic, and her stomach twisted. Again. She broke out in a sweat. Again! She saw stars swimming in the air around her. There was nothing. The deep well of her conjuring was empty. Trys was weeping now, and Elia's own hot tears joined his. What would happen to him if she couldn't get them out? The swimming stars crashed to the ceiling as the room flipped. She vomited bile and collided with the cold stone floor.

"Trys," she tried to call, but it came out as a hoarse whisper. Darkness closed over her, and she went senseless.

When Elia next woke, the screaming had stopped. Her eyes flew open. Where was Trys? Where was *she*? A low canvas cot creaked as she moved, and a thin wool blanket shifted. Right. Serraturan prison.

A shaft of golden sunlight sliced across the cell from a tiny barred window near the ceiling. Hours had passed. Hours of Trys suffering while she slept uselessly. But maybe now she could break the prison cell's binding spell. She sat up, and everything blurred in a dizzy haze. A familiar scent of lilac-and-spice perfume lingered in the air. But why was it familiar?

"Hello, Elia," a woman with a deep, melodic voice said. She *knew* that voice.

Elia turned and stared. The young woman was beyond beautiful, with waist-length hair the deep purple of nightfall and eyes like silver starlight. Her full lips tilted in a small smile. A diamond-and-silver diadem sat low on her brow and disappeared into her dark waves, its prismatic crystal dangling perfectly between her eyebrows. Queen Violetta. A thousand nights of laughter and dancing, adventures ending with pilfered sweets, and stolen secrets under a wisteria trellis crashed into Elia's memory. Her heart

twisted. Her friend, who Elia had hurt and betrayed. How could she ever have forgotten her precious friend?

Elia tried to stand, but her wobbling legs refused to hold her up. “Violetta—I mean, Your Majesty. You honor me with your presence.”

Queen Violetta frowned. “I didn’t want to believe my guards when they told me they found you.”

The straw pile had been removed. Elia had been bathed and dressed in fresh clothes. She studied the familiar courtly gown. It had skirts that fell from a silver waistband in gauzy layers of the sapphire and amethyst jewel tones Violetta liked best. Comfortable, elegant, and made with matchless quality.

“Your other clothes were filthy,” Violetta said simply.

Elia ran her hand over the soft cloudsilk. “Thank you for this, Your Majesty.”

“I had one of my maids get it from the wardrobe in your old quarters. That’s why it’s a little out of fashion.”

Elia’s heart lurched. “You kept my quarters all this time?”

Violetta scoffed. “No one wants to stay in there. I can barely get the servants to enter the rooms. They think it’s bad luck.” She gave Elia a pointed look.

Elia ran her hand down her face. It felt clean and fresh. Someone must have washed the festival paint off with potion. Her light gold hair fell around her shoulders in smoothly combed waves. Corielle’s braid crown and charms were gone. Elia’s body felt new, and her mouth no longer hurt. Perhaps a Healer had been allowed to mend her.

“I don’t deserve this kindness from you.”

The queen pressed her eyes shut. “No, you do not.”

The dress, the comforts in the cell, and the Healer were a message: *I know you, even if you don’t remember me. You have a history here. We are a kind, generous people who* you *hurt.*

Elia swung her knees over the edge of the cot and gingerly lowered herself to the cell floor. She pressed her forehead to the cold stone and tried not to inhale or think about the distasteful things the prison floor had likely seen. Then she looked up and found Violetta’s eyes.

“With all of my being, I deeply regret what I did. I apologize again. I will never stop being sorry for it.”

“Yet here you are,” Violetta mused in a quiet, dangerous tone. “Despite the harm you did, despite your apparent regret, despite the cost you surely knew would come . . . here you are. Why? And who is that beautiful wretch accompanying you?”

Elia raised herself to a kneeling position and met Violetta’s cool gaze. “He is Trystoferian Alexios Magnus Felipe Lightdragon, Ninth Prince of Isalindra, Duke of Valdan, Lord of Umbreck Estate.”

Violetta’s eyebrows rose. “Still keeping royal company, I see. And still acting like an idiot despite it.” Rage sparkled in Violetta’s silver eyes. “Why did you bring him to Serratura? Especially since you know better than most that visitors are forbidden.”

“To read a certain scroll in the library—”

“You mean the Scroll of Peace?” Violetta laughed. “Stop treating me like a fool, Elia, before I get truly angry. Tell me everything. All of it. So I can properly decide what to do.”

Elia bit her lip and took a deep breath as she decided where to begin. Finally, she said, “The prince’s brother was killed in the border war. His grief prompted years of scholarship regarding the Scroll of Peace, which is said to end any war with a single reading. He sought a way to honor his brother’s sacrifice and protect other families from paying the price for our king’s pointless war. Since Serratura is not at war, he thought you had no need for it. He convinced me that he could sneak into the library, read the scroll, and return before anyone noticed him.”

“How did he convince you? With his pretty face?” Violetta crossed her arms. Anyone else might think her cool and implacable, but Elia saw the viper coiled to strike. She’d been just like this the last time they’d spoken. “Did he seduce you into betraying me . . . again?”

“No. No, Your Majesty. It had nothing to do with you.” Elia gulped.

“Then tell me. The Elia I know wouldn’t have been convinced to stick her neck out because of some prince’s sob story and quest for honor. You’ve always been more sensible than that.”

The longer Violetta stayed, the more memories rushed back. The queen’s devastating beauty and infamous wrath had made Serraturans swoon and cower. But she’d shown Elia a side of herself so many never got to see. Her humor and gentleness, her kindness and passion for building a better Serratura. But Elia had destroyed that trust, and now she only saw the face of the vengeful queen. Icy indignation, rage, and beneath it all, hurt.

If anyone deserved to know Elia's real reason for coming here, it was Violetta. Though it was almost impossible to meet that silver gaze without flinching in shame, Elia kept her eyes trained on Violetta's face and tried to explain.

"You remember my father's . . . condition?" Elia paused for Violetta to nod. "Things have been difficult. My siblings and I have barely survived. Myron, my littlest brother, was recently touched by Morthanos. He's a Deathfate now, and the death temple has claimed him, despite the fact that he's so young." Violetta stiffened, and her lips parted into a soft *oh*. Elia told her the rest. About the information in the grimoire that could save Myron, and Trys's commission payment of sixty thousand in gold just to attempt the door. All of it. "How could I refuse? Would you not have done the same if you could have saved Cherin?"

Violetta's eyes narrowed. "Why do you mention him?" Her brother had died of a terrible wasting illness as a young child.

Elia flinched. Perhaps mentioning the Serraturan prince's tragic death was a terrible idea. But since she was already being foolish, she pressed on. "If a Healer had told you the cure for Cherin's illness was in a vault in a country that would never even miss it, wouldn't you risk your life to save him?"

Violetta rose from her chair and paced. After a moment, she stopped and faced Elia. "I see. I can't agree with your actions, but I understand your motives. I know Myron is precious to you. But why not approach me first and ask?"

Elia winced. "I didn't consider the possibility you might say yes. Or that you would allow Trys to accompany me."

"True enough. I know nothing about this ninth prince of Isalindra in Valdan. Why did you trust his scholarship regarding the scroll?"

"At first, I believed he was an expert. I had no reason not to. He's a Lore-mense, for Runa's sake. But since our arrival here"—Elia paused to grimace—"I have discovered that he was in over his head. He doesn't speak modern Serraturan. He only had texts in ancient Serraturan to learn the language, and he was going to try to get by on that."

The queen snorted and leaned against the wall. Maybe this time *would* be different. Maybe Elia had some hope of mercy, despite not deserving a hint of it. "I know. My own scholars had difficulty understanding him because he kept garbling ancient Serraturan and Valdanese."

Scholars? Not punishers or jailers? Had the screams been a nightmare? She looked up at Violetta. “Is he—?”

She shook her head. “He’s not well, Elia.”

“What do you mean? If he’s unwell, why did you torture him?”

Violetta stiffened as Elia realized her mistake. She’d been too bold. She’d questioned the queen of Serratura from a prison cell.

Queen Violetta scrutinized her, saying nothing. She walked to where Elia knelt and reached for her hand. Violetta slowly pulled Elia to her shaky feet and then guided her to the cot. Elia settled on the edge of the narrow bed, and Violetta sat beside her, handing her a cup of fragrant tea from the tray.

Something about the tea smelled unfamiliar. But she didn’t dare question the queen’s generosity.

“Torture? *Torture*, Elia? Who do you think I am?” She sounded sincerely hurt.

“I heard his screams earlier.” Elia sipped the tea. It *was* enchanted somehow, but likely not poisoned. If Violetta had wanted her dead, she’d had plenty of opportunities before now.

“The sound of his own choices. He read the Scroll of Peace without understanding what it does. My scholars say it’s a type of curse-scroll. When he spoke the words, the curse adhered to his skin. He is being transformed into something new, a creature of the scroll. The agony of that process is unimaginable. It took three guards and two medics to sedate him. He’s unconscious right now, but honestly, I’m surprised he survived.”

Alive. Trys was alive. Elia let out a breath and her body relaxed a bit. In fact, she relaxed a bit too much. Her limbs felt heavy and limp, but she pressed on. “Something new?”

Violetta shook her head, the sparkling crystal bobbing on her brow. “You should worry more about yourself. Your trial begins at sunrise tomorrow, but the outcome has already been decided.”

“Trial? I had hoped—” Elia twisted the cot blankets in her hands. Her mouth had gone dry, and she couldn’t stop herself from collapsing back into the pillow on her cot.

“For what exactly? That you would show up here unannounced, break into a secret vault with a foreign underlander, and we’d forgive you? I hoped I’d never see you again, Elia. But in my furthest imaginings, you’d visit to apologize, to beg forgiveness from all who’ve suffered. From me.”

Violetta paused and smoothed her skirt while she took a shaky breath. “But you only came back to cause more harm.” Her eyes were two silver pools, ready to brim over. “Did we mean nothing to you? Did *I* mean nothing to you?”

The anguish in Violetta’s voice was a hot blade slicing through Elia’s heart. But she’d never dared to imagine coming here to ask for forgiveness. That was far more brazen than sneaking information from a scroll in the library. She dropped her gaze to the floor.

“You *know* you weren’t nothing to me,” Elia said quietly. “I would take it all back if I could. Not a day goes by that I don’t regret my actions. I am so very sorry for unleashing the plague. And I am sorry for returning now, under these circumstances. Had I known this would, or even could, happen, I’d have let the death temple have my father. I would’ve begged on the streets with my other siblings and found another way to get Myron back. Anything not to unleash another curse. Or whatever is happening to Trys. Please, Violetta—Your Majesty—tell me what’s happening to Trys.”

For a long moment, Violetta didn’t move. Then, finally, she took Elia’s face in her hand and lifted her chin. “You really care for him, don’t you?”

There was no reason to hide it. Violetta had probably guessed right away. She had always been intuitive like that. “I’m starting to. Despite my best efforts.”

A ripple of pity flashed across Violetta’s face. “Then I’m sorry for you. The scroll will turn him into a harrowing beast, bound to ending a war and keeping peace in the country he named in the spell. Your country. That’s what my scholars say. No one has unlocked it in a thousand years, and the records are unclear about the fate of the last Servant of the Scroll.”

“May I see him?”

“No. He’s in no condition. But as your accomplice, he will be present at your trial—chained, of course.”

“What will happen to me?” Elia asked in a near whisper.

Violetta put her hand on Elia’s arm. “In the weeks after the plague, I was so furious with you. I hated you. Had you come back then, I would have slain you myself and ignored our custom of fair trials. But now . . .” She paused and exhaled. “Now I can’t hate you. I don’t want you to die. You are still dear to me, despite my anger.” She pulled her hand back and placed it over her heart. “But Elia, even I cannot undo a royal edict. As queen, I don’t have the luxury of mistakes and regrets. Striking the edict

that condemns you would mean admitting that I, the queen, had made a mistake. It would also cause pain to all the victims who hope for justice."

Elia dropped to her knees and clutched her chest. This was it. She could barely breathe. "So, I'll die then." It wasn't a question anymore.

The plague. Failing Myron. Hurting Papa. She would pay for all of it at the hand of a Serraturan executioner. Elia's breath came in quick gasps. Surely Morthanos would punish her for withholding Papa. Surely Mama would be ashamed of how her oldest daughter had failed the family. Elia was about to go through the gates into the realm of the dead with no passage fee, no mourners, and more failures than she could possibly atone for. Things weren't supposed to end this way. Though it was what she deserved.

Elia looked back at Violetta. For sympathy? For confirmation of her fears? It didn't matter. Violetta bit her lip and looked away. Her expression flickered between pity, affection, and cool ire. She glanced back at the door to Elia's cell, where a royal guard waited to escort the queen out of the prison.

"My servants will attend you before the trial. Follow all their directions without complaint, question, or deviation, and you may have some comfort before the end."

Elia's eyelids drooped. The room went blurry. Violetta gave her a pained look and leaned forward to help her settle. She tucked back her hair to whisper in her ear.

"Now we must truly part, Elia Tallis. But how we do so will be your choice."

Choice? What choice? But Elia's mouth wasn't working. Nothing was working. Her whole body felt heavy. The queen of Serratura rose and walked to the cell door, leaving Elia alone as an enchanted sleep overtook her.

OceanofPDF.com

19

When Elia next woke, night had fallen. Other than a dim everlantern in the corridor, her cell was heavily shadowed. She shifted on the cot, and something hard dug into her hip. She was about to pull whatever it was out of her pocket when she heard a guard pacing nearby in the corridor.

“Finally awake, plague-bringer?” He sneered through the cell door’s window bars. “Thinking about causing more trouble? Well, don’t bother. The Nameless Queen is too smart for the likes of you. Her maid will be back with another tonic soon enough to keep you nice and drowsy till the trial.”

Elia blinked at him. So that was what had been in the tea. They were trying to keep her sedated so she couldn’t use her magic to escape. Her realization must have shown because the guard nodded at her.

“That’s right. You’ll sleep, and then you’ll die. My wife is one of the afflicted. I have to wear this medallion with her portrait and hair every day or I’ll forget she ever existed.” He held up a miniature portrait of a pretty woman with a heart-shaped face and a sweet smile. His eyes were full of fire as he said, “I hope it takes days for you to die when they dangle you from the island’s underbelly. I hope you don’t die until they cut the chain over the Mostro Sea where a leviathan rips apart your bones and devours you.”

Elia shoved down the fear that burned like acid in her belly. “That was graphic. And specific.”

“We’ve all had plenty of time to imagine ways for you to die since you unleashed the plague. I think mine is rather more merciful than you deserve.”

She shivered and hoped to the gods he wouldn’t get his wish. “Where’s my friend?”

“Your *accomplice*, you mean?” His angry gaze bored into her.

“Is he alive? Where is he?” Panic gripped her heart, and her hands shook. She shoved them into her pockets. The thing that had been digging into her hip was a palm-sized metal disc.

The guard smirked. “Getting what he deserves for thieving from the vaults. He’s in no shape to help you.” His grin was anything but kind as he jeered, “Best be worrying about yourself, plague-bringer. His fate will seem kind compared to yours tomorrow.”

Then he continued his patrol, not pausing to wait for her reply. This was so unlike the Serratura she knew, which had prided itself on respect and common kindness. The plague had changed that. *She* had changed that. When his footsteps sounded far away, Elia slid the metal disc from her pocket. It was a strange hue of lilac gray, and the image of a queen shimmered in the dim prison light. Violetta. As Elia held the disc, it heated and vibrated. She glanced up nervously, but the guard was nowhere in sight. Motes of shimmering enchantment filled her cell, and suddenly, the only sound she could hear was the gentle buzz of the disc. A moment later, a soft all-too-familiar voice spoke.

My old friend—

Tomorrow, I must order your execution, but you don’t need to die. The tea was a sedative mixed with sanadew potion to restore your magic. The guards change at midnight. I left your belongings on your person. Never return. Please. For both our sakes.

When Violetta’s voice faded, the shimmering motes winked out one by one, and the disc itself dissolved into the air. Though it was gone, the words *you don’t need to die* repeated in her mind. Violetta had left her a way out. With her magic, Elia could escape, and with the pages in her pocket, she could save Myron.

But that would mean leaving Trys behind. The guard didn’t say where Trys had been taken. She clamped her teeth and tried to shut out the memory of his kiss and his gentleness in the corridors under the library. Violetta hadn’t even mentioned him in her note.

Elia had to choose. Leave Serratura tonight and save her brother. Or try to escape the prison to some other part of the island and search for Trys. But it was impossible to do that without attracting notice. The scholars and Healers of Serratura were in a much better position to help him right now than she was. Myron needed her *now*. She wrapped her arms around herself and gritted her teeth. There was no way around it. She *had* to leave.

Elia reached for the sturdy silver chain around her neck. The indigo vial rested on her sternum, right next to the oathstone pendant she and Trys had sworn their blood vows on before this cursed trip. Papa’s blood would give

her a sure path to home. But there was only one door she could enchant. The cell door. And casting any sort of enchantment would sound the alarm. Unless they were distracted by something . . . like a guard change at midnight. Elia had one shot for escape, and she was not going to let it pass. She would have to time it perfectly.

Elia waited for the sound of the midnight guard change, staring out the tiny cell window at the winking stars. Somewhere under the same stars, Trys was in excruciating pain. *Keep him safe, keep him well, keep him unharmed*, she chanted in silent prayer to Runa and every god she could think of.

As the minutes slid by, Elia mentally choreographed exactly how her escape would work. She would need to start quietly singing the incantation to open a pathway home as she walked toward the door with the vial. As stealthily as possible, she would stamp it with a drop of her father's blood, causing the alarm to trigger. After conjuring the key and jumping through the door, she'd need to seal the pathway behind her instantly without getting stuck in between here and home. That danger was far greater than getting captured by Serraturan prison guards. She would arrive in Isalindra in pieces if she didn't execute the maneuvers perfectly. She pictured it over and over until her body ached to begin.

Voices down the hall interrupted her reverie. Laughter. Jangling keys. The guard change. It must be midnight.

Elia stepped toward the cell door, beginning the first notes of the incantation. She uncorked the vial and put a drop of Papa's blood on her finger pad. Never breaking her rhythm, she dropped into a crouch and pressed her finger to the dark brass of the lock on the door. The metal warmed under Papa's blood and her magic. Halfway through the incantation, the familiar key to Isalindra began to form in her hand, a bitter steel weight. The guards' voices drew closer. She rolled onto her toes as the alarm began to blare.

"Hey, plague-bringer," one yelled. A different one from the sneering guard earlier. "What do you think you're doing?"

Running footsteps. Shouting. The incantation was nearly complete. Sweat beaded at her temples as she struggled to access the drifting path home. The last ridges of the key hardened, and she slammed it into the lock on the plate just as a sweaty, red-faced guard came into view. She threw open the door and launched forward onto the worn hardwood planks of

Tallis Travels. Home. But not safe . . . yet. The guards roared from the other side. Elia whirled back and slammed the shop door shut. Pressing all her weight against it, she sped through the incantation to seal the pathway to Serratura behind her.

Elia fell to her knees, breath heaving. Relief at her own safety and the sick horror of leaving Trys behind battled for dominance. She'd failed him. She'd abandoned him. The ghost of the life they would have shared taunted her. Trys would have been her partner. Her friend. Her . . . husband. But now, he wouldn't be her anything.

OceanofPDF.com

20

When she'd caught her breath, Elia ran to the window and dragged the heavy curtains closed. A fairy tale played out on the threadlore panels. She glanced back at the stair door. Grivya peered at her through a wild tangle of silver-and-black curls, bedclothes rumpled.

"Get away from the window before the king's soldiers see you. They've been patrolling every hour."

Elia gave a tight, weary smile to the dear, cranky old witch. "Hello, Rinna-Grivya." She almost hadn't seen that face again. How could Elia ever have been annoyed by her?

"Don't you *hello* me. Come over here and get up these stairs. I'll put tea on, and you can explain why you and that prince ran off in the night like a couple of thieves. I hope you have a good reason for the pandemonium you caused. The whole neighborhood was in an uproar."

Oh, that was how. But she obeyed the witch's instructions. By the time Elia had finished telling Grivya about the journey and showing her the pages from the grimoire, Saya, Orin, and Isak had joined her at the breakfast table. They were puffy-eyed and sleep-ruffled, but they didn't interrupt her tale.

Elia smiled wearily at her siblings. "I'm so glad you're all home safe. How is Papa?"

Saya's face fell. "The same. Rinna-Grivya bribed a guard with gold to let us back in to take care of him."

Elia raised her brows at the witch, who merely shrugged in return. "Had to make sure my dear Carrick didn't suffer for your recklessness."

Elia had to swallow a lump in her throat. Normally, Grivya wouldn't willingly part with a single copper, let alone gold. "Thank you, Rinna," she managed, and then cleared her throat. "Anything else I missed?"

"I made two new shawls," Orin piped up, and suddenly it was like a family dinner, where they all shared their contributions and accomplishments.

Elia's eyes burned. She had almost lost this forever, this connection and love. She could have offered it to Trys. It was the one thing in the world he lacked.

"I cleaned Rinna-Grivya's shop and helped Widow Berry prepare for the audit," Isak chimed in.

"And Myron?" Elia asked. "How is he?"

Grivya tore her gaze from the grimoire pages. "As well as can be expected for a little boy in a death temple. He's terrified, but no visible cuts or bruises."

Elia's chest loosened a little. "They let you see him?"

"They gave in after I threatened to send my whole coven to insist on access to the boy. Even the death priests don't want to pick a fight with a coven." Grivya snorted. "We're a thorny bunch. Easier to just grant simple requests like letting me call on their new oracle."

"Thank you for that, Rinna." Elia wanted to hug her, but Rinna-Grivya would object. "I'm sure he was glad to see you."

"He'd rather see you, but until you're legally an adult and can assume official guardianship of him, they don't have to grant you access."

Elia sighed as she bit into a lemon-thyme scone. She'd expected as much. "I take it Maisie has been by since we have fresh pastries?"

"Yes. She brought the pastries yesterday when she stopped in to check on us," said Isak. "I'm helping prepare her books for the royal audit as thanks for visiting Myron."

Elia grabbed his hand across the table. "That's perfect, Isak. I'm sure she appreciates it."

Always flustered by praise, Isak blushed and looked away. "It's the least I could do."

Grivya set the small stack of papers on the table and rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "The ritual described here is complicated and probably not worth the risk. You should just try to bargain with Morthanos."

Elia balled her fist. "Who knows what the god will want in exchange for Myron?" Nothing Elia would want to give. The gods never wanted simple, easy payments. And while she could walk away from a bargain with bad terms, it would still leave Myron in Morthanos's clutches. A ritual, even a dangerous one, would be surer than trying to bargain with the god of death and the afterlife. She let out a breath. "The ritual mentions a harbinger of Morthanos. What is that?"

Grivya drummed her fingers on the table. “It’s been a long time since I heard any talk about harbingers. They’re a herald of the power of the gods. In Serratura, you and Trys awakened the Scroll of Peace. It seems that the scroll was designed to create a harbinger when the curse affixes to someone the way it has to Trys.”

Runa take all witches. Why did they make everything so complicated? Elia put both hands on the table and leaned forward. “I don’t understand. What does Trys have to do with a harbinger? What does the Scroll of Peace have to do with Morthanos?”

Grivya guzzled down the dregs of her tea before continuing. “War is a senseless act of life-taking that dishonors the god of death. It takes the power and decisions that belong to him and places that power in the hands of mortal kings and soldiers. The Scroll of Peace is more than retribution for that theft. It is a warning that should the war continue, Morthanos’s power—death—will be unleashed on all involved. Thus, Trys is a harbinger of Morthanos’s power. If you want to lift the godstouch from Myron, you’ll need Trys’s blood.”

How was she supposed to get Trys’s blood when she had no idea where the Serraturans had stashed him? And if he had transformed into some kind of monster, would she even be able to ask him for blood? Elia blew out a breath and collected everyone’s dishes.

“It’s a lot to think about,” she said as she rinsed their plates and silverware.

“You really should just go to the death temple and initiate a deal with Morthanos. But I will consult my coven to see what I can glean about the situation. For now, I need to leave. I have a shop to run.” Grivya stood and stretched. Several cracks and pops emitted from her aged body.

Grivya hobbled out the door, and Elia looked around the table at her brothers and sister. They were pale and staring at her with shadowed eyes. They all looked so tired, so hollowed out from the stress of eking by. They needed rest and a new start. And though Elia had lost her future with Trys, she still had the commission he’d paid up front.

It was time to stop holding her siblings back. She’d figure out her own future later.

“I have news to share with all of you. Good and bad. Let’s start with the good. The prince’s commission for travel to Serratura was sixty thousand in gold.” She paused for their collective gasp. When she’d told them about the

commission, Elia had left out the amount in case he changed his mind about going. She didn't want to hold out that kind of hope only to take it back. But now, Elia smiled, ready to give the best news they'd had in years. "We finally have the money for you all to take the next step on your paths. Isak, don't agree to any new commissions to prepare shop owners for the royal audit. Instead, you need to study for the academy entrance exams. Saya, same for you. No more backdoor healing, just keep looking after Papa and complete your application to the Royal Academy of Medicine. Trys submitted letters of recommendation to both of your respective universities to encourage them to give you priority admission. Orin, you don't need to sell another stitch of your work. Prepare your best pieces for an apprenticeship audition with the Royal Sartorialist. Trys told him to expect us to contact him for an appointment. As soon as he sees your work, you'll be on your way to clothing royalty."

In an instant they were all hugging her. Saya and Orin were crying, and Isak grinned like she hadn't seen in years. This was why she'd done everything she had for the last year. This was what she sacrificed and risked for. This was what Papa suffered for, what Mama had hoped for. This was what the death priest Baestran had stolen with a bribe and Trys had returned with a commission. A pang seared her heart at the thought of him. If only he could be here to see how he'd changed their lives.

After a few moments of celebration, Isak pushed his glasses up his nose and visibly braced himself. "What's the bad news, Elia?"

She swallowed and then said, "It's time for us to part with Papa."

Saya cried out. "But there are still medicines we could try. With that much money, we could hire a truly gifted Healer to try a more comprehensive treatment."

Elia shook her head and grabbed her sister's hand. "The death temple has already come for him once. My bargain with Baestran bought us a little more time, but Morthanos was calling his soul to the gate even back when we first gave him Grivya's elixir. We have to let him go. But the prince's money will allow us to give him a fine send-off for his reunion with Mama."

Tears flowed freely down Saya's cheeks. "Grivya says the best Healers know when to let go. But I hoped there was still something I could do."

Love and understanding for her sister flowed through Elia. She put her hands on Saya's shoulders and looked her in the eyes. "You've already done

so much for Papa. More than anyone else. You kept him comfortable and as healthy as possible all that time. And now you can lay that burden down and redirect your studies to the kind of future you want in healing."

Saya's shoulders shuddered. Elia pulled her into a tight embrace, her own eyes burning as she said, "Job well done, Saya. He can rest now. Thank you for all you did for him. For us."

Saya's sobs were as much release as sorrow, and Elia held her tightly as her little sister grappled with a grief far beyond her years.

"What about Myron?" Orin asked a bit shakily. He was rubbing a swath of navy silk between his fingers. "Will we get to see him?"

Elia had to tamp down the anger that rose at the thought of the temple deciding whether Myron would be allowed to mourn with his family.

"It would be blasphemous for them to keep him from his own father's passage," Isak said. "He'll be there."

"And he'll be with us," Elia agreed. "I'll make sure of it."

And with that, they began the somber task of facing Papa's last days in the mortal world.

OceanofPDF.com

21

The morning of Papa's passage dawned bright and brought with it the weight of responsibility and the dread of the loss Elia would face before the sun set. It had taken a few days to make all the arrangements. Andek and Maisie had helped Elia select the passage cart vendor and place the commission. When the neighborhood Sartorialist had delivered Papa's passage ensemble, Orin had declared he'd make it his best work yet. For Papa. Elia had held him tightly as they stared at the high-quality but unadorned tunic. Orin had cradled it to his chest and somberly retreated to his work chair. Since then, he'd spent every free moment stitching threadlore into the fine silk tunic. It danced across the silk, artfully replaying the story of how Papa met Mama. A romance for his reunion with her.

The day before the passage ceremony, a Floralista from Maisie's district delivered enchanted arrangements of white carnations and indigo salt lilies, prized at death rites for how they blossomed under tears. As everyone had marveled at the exquisite blooms, Elia had felt a hollow ache. They never could have afforded such expensive flowers without Trys. In fact, every time she paid a vendor or made more costly arrangements than she could have otherwise done, Trys was with her. In her mind, in her heart, taking care of her family with his gold. If he'd been here with her, he'd have helped with the arrangements. He would have offered advice based on his own sorrowful experience. And she'd have been grateful for it. He'd have offered warm smiles and easy laughs to put her siblings at ease. When she wept at the finality of it all, his strong arms would have held her, enveloping her with his comforting scent. He would have been her rock, her haven, and support. And when everything was in place, he would have walked beside her and her family as they sent Papa into the afterlife. But there was only a searing ache of regret and loss where Trys was supposed to be.

And now, a strange mixture of gratitude, love, and dread churned in Elia as Grivya arrived. She was wearing the traditional silver-and-blue robes of

her coven, but she was veiled in gray as if mourning her own son. She threw the veil aside to kiss each sibling's cheek, and Elia didn't think she imagined the fine mist in the witch's black eyes.

Grivya joined them for a feast of Papa's favorite foods, and they spent the day recounting their favorite stories of his life, laughing and crying together. Another layer of grief settled over every story involving Myron. The death temple had refused to release him for this part of the passage celebration, claiming it didn't pertain to his religious duties. No amount of begging or bribes had convinced the priests to let Myron join them until it was time for their part. Elia added it to the long list of offenses she would never forgive them for.

Late in the afternoon, Baestran arrived at the shop with four death temple acolytes. His bone mask displayed the face of the past. The face of death. But Elia's attention quickly turned to the smallest figure among his retinue. Myron. She rushed out the door and shoved the acolytes aside, pulling Myron into a tight bear hug and peppering his little cheeks with kisses. Then she paused to take in the changes their short time apart had wrought on him.

Dark purple circles hung under Myron's eyes, and he seemed thinner than when she'd last seen him. They had dressed him in a Deathfate uniform. The gray-and-scarlet robes, which had obviously been made for an older person, hung loosely off his little body. His gaze drifted into the middle distance, as though he was having trouble focusing on any one thing. What had the priests done to him? What had Morthanos done?

"Myron, sweetheart," Elia said loudly enough for Baestran to hear, "are they not feeding you? Do they not let you rest? What's happening to you in that temple?"

"I want to come home," he whispered.

Baestran glared at her and snapped, "I can hardly force him to eat if he doesn't like our food. And he refuses sleep in order to avoid his responsibilities as a Fate. We've started giving him a tonic at night."

Volcanic fury ignited in Elia's chest. "Perhaps you should let him come home, then," she said through gritted teeth. "He'll be a healthier, more able Fate after sleeping in his own bed and eating with his family."

"Know your place, Elia Tallis," he snarled. "Need I remind you of the punishment you've already incurred from Morthanos? Do you wish to call down even greater retribution by once again taking what belongs to a god?"

Baestran’s eyes flashed almost as bright as his dazzling, jeweled passage robes. Wisps of dark magic hovered around his raised hand as he pointed at her.

He could end her right now, and no one would be able to do anything about it. Who would save Myron then? Elia pressed her lips together and inclined her head to the priest. As close as an apology or sign of deference as she’d offer the man who’d stolen Myron away.

“Let’s keep the focus on today’s business,” she said smoothly as she shoved her anger and grief and desperation deep inside and locked it away. But she let a bit of steel into her voice as she asked, “Does Morthanos recognize my father for entrance to his realm, Honored One?”

Baestran’s hand fell, and his lips quirked in a silent victory as he gave the traditional response. “Rejoice, daughter of water and earth, your father’s name has been recognized for citizenship in Morthanos’s realm.”

Under Baestran’s direction, the acolytes lifted Papa’s unconscious body to the passage cart. Elia and her siblings arranged flowers and sentimental possessions around him while Baestran chanted a prayer to initiate passage to Morthanos.

As they prepared to depart, Elia took a few calming breaths and looked down at Papa. He was so much thinner than he had been before the illness. But his beloved laugh lines were still there. The constellation of freckles across his nose that matched her own. The tiny white scar on his jaw where he’d cut himself shaving once. He had suffered long enough and endured well beyond what anyone should to keep their family alive. He deserved peace and rest and reunion with Mama. Elia picked up his warm hand and interlocked their fingers as the acolytes fell into formation for the procession.

Surrounded by the enchanted white carnations and deep blue salt lilies, Papa’s chest still rose and fell. At the gate, he’d breathe his last.

Elia had laid gold coins on his eyes to pay his passage through the gate, far more than the silver or copper toll for most of the merchant class. Morthanos was probably still angry with her, but hopefully he remained ignorant of her plans regarding Myron. It couldn’t hurt to appeal to Morthanos’s good side with a little gold. If the god of death had a good side.

Elia, Saya, and Isak all wore expensive new clothes, and Orin had added threadlore to his sleeves and tunic hem. Rinna-Grivya held Papa’s other

hand. Elia handed salt lilies to her siblings to carry in the procession. Andek and Maisie followed the Tallises. Maisie kept one hand on Elia's back, rubbing small comforting circles, steadying Elia as the acolytes positioned Papa's cart.

Baestran signaled for the acolytes to begin, and as one, they chanted and slowly processed down the street. The passage song was a signal to every household and citizen along the way that they should stop, pay their respects, and join the procession if they chose. Professional mourners trailed at the end of the line, wailing and beating deep-timbred drums as they danced in Papa's honor.

Even though it had been years since Elia had accompanied a passage cart or smelled the cloyingly sweet scent of blooming salt lilies, she was taken back to Mama's passage. A much more modest event. Elia had had little to say to Mama on the way to the temple. Nothing beyond a promise to keep Isak, Saya, Orin, and Myron safe. Elia had managed to keep that vow until the day Baestran showed up to take Myron. She would rectify that soon enough. But she did have words for Papa. She bent close to Papa's ear and pulled the letter she'd written from her pocket. This would be her only chance to read it where he might hear.

"Before we get to the gate, there's something I need to say." She stumbled on a loose cobblestone as fresh tears pooled in her eyes. The cart jostled a little, and Elia hoped he could hear her over the wailing and chanting. "You never let us down. Not even once. You were the best father we ever could have asked for, and I'm proud to be your daughter. I only wish—" Elia choked as a sob caught in her throat. "I only wish we'd had more time before your sickness. I wish you could see what capable, intelligent children you've raised." She took another hitching breath. Thank the gods she'd written this down. She'd never have been able to form the words otherwise. "And I'm sorry. I'm so, so very sorry for giving you the potion and for all the times I siphoned your magic. I hope you understand why I did it and that I never wanted to hurt you." She gulped and let out a sob. This was the hardest thing she'd ever had to say. "I hope you have the peaceful entrance to the afterlife and the reunion with Mama you deserve. I'll take care of Myron, Orin, Saya, and Isak until they meet you again. Tell Mama I love her. I'll miss you both so much. I love you, Papa, now and forever."

Her tears brought the salt lily to full indigo bloom. She kissed it and pressed it and the letter under Papa's hand. Maisie's arm slid around her waist, a strength and a comfort. Elia nodded to Isak. From his side of the cart, Isak leaned over Papa and made whatever peace he needed to make with their father, pressing his lily and letter into the crook of Papa's arm. Saya followed suit, barely able to speak through her weeping. Orin sniffled and tucked a silk cravat into Papa's front pocket. It was embroidered in tiny threadlore lines addressed to Papa. Isak lifted Myron when it was his turn, but instead of speaking he pressed his forehead to Papa's and remained there in silence for several seconds. Elia's heart cracked at the sight of Myron's uncharacteristic solemnity.

All too soon, the black-and-silver temple rose into view. The death priests waited at the entrance to greet them, joining in the chant. Acolytes in gray robes took control of the passage cart. Only family members were permitted to enter the temple for the final part of the passage. The Leonins gave each of them tight hugs, and Rinna-Grivya clasped Elia's hand.

The hall inside the temple was smoky with incense and echoing with chants. But none of it masked the enormity of the silver gate. It was as huge as Elia remembered, thirty feet high and decorated in onyx depictions of Morthanos's lore. Ever-fresh salt lilies in full bloom lay at its base. The gate only opened for a person's final passage into Morthanos's realm. Elia and her siblings lined the final path, and when the signal came, they dropped to their knees. Myron tucked himself so close to Elia's side she thought she might fall over. She clasped his hand and laced their fingers together. The chanting stopped, and everyone held silence for Papa's final breaths.

The enormous gate slowly and noiselessly opened wide. Though thick mists lay beyond it, honeyed music played, and the fresh smells of a forest on a summer morning wafted past the sweet salt lilies. This was it. Papa's last moment. She was really losing him. Myron gripped her hand tighter.

A whisper passed the gate, soft and melodious but loud enough for all in the temple to hear. *Welcome, Carrick Tallis, citizen of Morthanos's realm. Enter and remain at peace in a world with no end.*

The passage cart rolled without the help of human hands and passed beyond the gate into Morthanos's realm. The gate closed with a boom that resonated throughout the temple. Just like that, Elia was an orphan. But not without family. Not without hope.

When everyone rose back to their feet, Baestran approached her, hand outstretched and eyebrow lifted expectantly.

“What do you want?” Elia whispered aggressively.

He snorted in annoyance. “What else? Myron, come. It’s time for you to return to your brethren.”

“*We* are his brethren,” Saya said with quiet intensity.

It was cruel for the priest to disrupt the somber moments after Papa’s passage by reclaiming Myron. He could have at least let Myron come home for the evening. Her family all needed each other, and the thought of Myron mourning alone in the temple was appalling.

“Truly, Baestran?” Elia cried, forgetting temple etiquette in her outrage. “You can’t give him one night to grieve with his family?”

“The boy has no family now,” Baestran snapped. “He is a member of a holy order. Blood may be thicker than water, but divine bonds are the strongest of all. He will stay here, where he belongs.”

White-hot rage flared through Elia, and for a moment, all she could think about was attacking this priest and torching the temple. But she couldn’t risk his retribution, not with Myron on the line. After a few moments, she mastered her breathing and turned to her shocked siblings.

“Let’s go home,” she said quietly.

Each of them gave Myron a fierce embrace. Elia hugged him last, and Myron clung tightly when she tried to let go. Sobs shook his shoulders.

“Take me home with you,” he wept. “Please. I want to come home. Don’t leave me here with them.”

Baestran stepped toward them, seething with unspoken threats. But Elia held up a hand to stop him. She bent close to Myron’s ear.

“I am going to get you out of here,” she whispered. “I swear to Runa I will not let you stay here one moment longer than you have to. Endure. Be patient. Do whatever you need to do to survive this place. I *will* get you out.”

“But I want to come home now,” he whimpered.

“If I try to take you now, he’ll kill me. You have to wait a little longer. I’m so sorry, Myron.”

She would have told him about the rite and her plan to free him. But who knew what Morthanos could see in Myron’s mind? Elia let him see her determination instead, her anger and fearlessness. And as Baestran dragged

Myron back to the acolytes, she hoped that would be enough to strengthen him.

When Elia and her family exited the temple, the sky was streaked in opalescent tones of rose, amber, and gold. As the first stars sparked to life in the dusky horizon, the mourners lining the streets released colorful passage lanterns that floated into the heavens to catch the gods' attention and show that Papa's departing soul was mourned. The multihued lantern glow cast Elia's siblings in a vibrancy none of them felt.

Isak, Orin, and Saya would continue on their new paths, and Elia would soon set out to right her wrongs and free the brother who'd been cursed on her account. While they studied, learning to expand and strengthen their magic, she would pursue absolution. But it was only right. The choice to keep Papa from the gate had been hers, not theirs. They deserved their new futures, and she deserved to pay for the past. Maybe when Myron was home, she could look forward instead of back.

As they walked back home, Elia could have sworn she felt Papa's blessing falling on her, and with it came a new surety that her future was something she could and would unlock. Someday.

OceanofPDF.com

22

Three weeks later, Elia helped Isak and Saya pack and prepare for their respective boarding schools. It felt horrible and wrong to send them away with Myron's fate uncertain and Papa so recently passed. But training their magic was the best way to give them opportunities for advancement in life. Isak would complete two years at the Valdan Royal Mense Academy. Then he'd complete an advanced apprenticeship before determining what path to take. Saya had several years ahead of her at the Royal Academy of Medicine, but her experience tending Papa and backdoor visitors at the shop would give her an edge over her classmates. They both promised to write regularly.

Elia cried after delivering them to their schools. For so long, she'd worked herself to exhaustion to care for them. Feeding them, clothing them, housing them. Everything she'd done had been to keep them together. To preserve a semblance of the life they'd always known. And now the family was breaking apart. Even though it was the right choice for everyone, even though this would have happened if their parents had survived, the weight of loss settled in Elia's gut, a twin stone to the fresh loss of Papa.

Thanks to the recommendation letter Trys had sent before their journey, Orin had been granted an audience with the Esteemed Master Sartorialist of the Royal House, a position he hoped to one day take over. After a single hungry look at Orin's best work, the Master Sartorialist wrote the apprenticeship contract on the spot, obtained a royal waiver for Orin's age, and ordered the servants to prepare a room for him. Elia gave Orin a final hug, holding him tight, before a steward escorted Orin to the Thread Wing of the palace.

Elia's birthday came and went with little fanfare. At nineteen, she was now considered an adult with the full rights and privileges of a citizen. She could marry, pay taxes, and most important, she could enter any temple to worship or seek wisdom from the priests and Fates. Elia took her new freedom to visit Myron as often as the death temple priests would allow it. While there was no rule against repeatedly seeking out an oracle, the temple

discouraged frequent social calls so as not to disrupt their routines. Not that she cared about that.

Elia's heart was in shambles every time she left the temple. Every day, Myron looked more frayed. And it would only get worse. His future would be cut a little shorter with every prophecy he told and with every vision inflicted on him. Prophesying would ebb away at his life force until one day, the priests would send a drained, exhausted version of him through the gate to serve Morthanos in the afterlife.

There was only one thing that would put a stop to this. One way to save Myron. When Elia finally approached Maisie about her plan to go through with the rite, Maisie had begged Elia not to go.

"It's too dangerous, Elia. Not worth the risk," she'd said as she packed a box of hearty bread rations to send to the army for part of her war tax. "We'll keep trying. There has to be a legal loophole we just haven't found yet. Or some judge brave enough to order the temple to release Myron."

"You don't understand," Elia countered as she wrapped loaves in enchanted wax that would seal in the freshness. "Completing the rite is the only way. I wouldn't have risked everything to go to Serratura if there was another option. Grivya's hope magic would have revealed another path if something else could free Myron."

Even if it cost Elia everything, she was going to tear Myron from Morthanos's grasp. Maisie had grumbled but reluctantly agreed.

"Just don't run off without coming to talk to me first. I'm going to keep trying other options."

In the meantime, Elia had a monarch to appease. A royal steward had visited the shop this morning to deliver a gold-sealed royal summons. It was worded as an invitation to meet with the king and his council about the disappearance of his nephew, but there was nothing optional about it. While the steward had assured her the meeting would be a formal discussion between a free citizen and her king, it was hard not to see it as a command to come and be interrogated. Of course the king was wondering where Trys was. He was the ninth prince of Isalindra, and even if he preferred a dusty library to court, his absence would be noticed. One more thing she and Trys had failed to consider before that doomed voyage to Serratura.

Elia would fall to her knees and lick the king's boots if she had to. Anything it took to survive and break Myron's godstouch.

Elia remembered the Serraturan court as an airy and ethereal palace. Fit for a kingdom in the skies. It was a court full of light and windows in homage to the celestial gods. She had spent so much time there dancing, playing pranks, and sparking all kinds of courtier gossip with . . . someone. An important person who lurked on the hazy edge of her memories. Elia's heart fell with yet another reminder of the plague she'd unleashed.

But when Elia entered the Valdan court, the difference was striking. It was dark and overstuffed with art and statues, giving the sense that it was crowded even though only a dozen or so courtiers lingered in the room. As Elia passed through the mahogany threshold to the throne room, her name was announced. Her boots clicked against the black-and-gold marble floors as she was escorted to the throne. There were no cushions or thick wool rugs for the comfort of supplicants, and the cold floor bit into her knees as she knelt, awaiting the king's recognition.

The king was a broad-shouldered man in his fifties. His face was strikingly similar to Trys's own, but without joy or playfulness. A wiry multicolored beard draped over his exquisitely tailored velvet waistcoat. Jeweled rings glinted as the king lifted his finger and shook it at her.

"You," he shouted, wrath sparking in his amber eyes. "Tell me. Where is my nephew?"

She lowered her head. "Forgive me, Your Majesty, but I—"

"Get off the floor and stand to face me, Conjurista." His deep voice rolled off the cavernous walls like thunder. "Show me the face of the woman brave enough to steal my nephew away on an international voyage without so much as a by-your-leave from the king and then return alone."

Elia stood and faced the seething monarch. His nostrils flared, and a bright flush stained his cheeks. It was achingly similar to the flush that sometimes stole over Trys's own face, and seeing it again here was like ripping open a wound.

"There she is," he snarled. "My nephew's *betrothed*. Do you have any idea how much trouble it causes when royals leave the country without any sort of preparation or a royal writ of travel? I suspect you do since you absconded with him before my guards arrived."

Elia winced and dropped her eyes to the floor as courtiers tittered from the margins of the room.

When she didn't reply, the king continued. "When Trystoferian's steward informed me of my nephew's intention to marry a common

merchant girl, I thought he'd gone mad. Imagine a prince looking to marry outside the nobility! But at least he was finally thinking of his responsibilities. No more playing scholar. Despite his choice of partner, he was finally taking steps to continue his father's line. I thought, 'At last, a woman has distracted his mind from unworthy pursuits, and now he can prioritize his role as a prince of this kingdom.' Thus, though it broke the tradition of keeping the royal estates in the nobility, I chose to allow the marriage to proceed." He paused, tapped his fingers together, and frowned. "Then that whining, greasy little scholar reported that Trystoferian had been coming to their guild house to study Serratura and the Scroll of Peace. That he was trying to find a way there. And suddenly the prince, who had offered marriage to a key Conjurista who runs a travel shop, disappears before I can question him about it. So, confirm for me, Conjurista, where did you take my nephew?"

Elia had to tread carefully. It was unlikely he would be forgiving if she misstepped. But there was no use lying or hedging the truth if the king already suspected.

"I took him to the Great Library in Serratura," she said, swallowing as the king's face reddened in anger. "He was desperate to go, and I did not want to at first. As he tried to convince me, we became . . . friends. He offered marriage as an enticement for me to accept his commission."

The king stood and swept his arm wide. "Clear the throne room," he ordered. "Everyone out except for the Conjurista." When all the nobles and officials had exited, the king closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "That foolish boy. I sent the guard to bring him here before he could do something rash. And then you fled with him, right under their noses. To a near-mythical, forbidden realm, for the gods' sakes. I ought to throw you in the most desolate dungeon cell I have. Tell me why he hasn't returned. Did the Serraturans imprison him for stealing this scroll he wanted?"

"He didn't steal it. He only read the Scroll of Peace, Your Majesty."

Well, this was great. She was emphasizing all the wrong parts of the story. She had planned to tell the king how minor her involvement was. How she didn't dare deny the commission of an esteemed prince. How she was only doing her duty as an honest citizen. But the king's anger flustered her, and nothing was coming out how she'd planned.

"Then why didn't he return with you? The scholar I questioned said it was so arcane most scholars have forgotten about it. He said he thought it

was just folklore. What he didn't know was why Trystoferian would want it." He tapped his foot impatiently.

She blurted out, "It endows an ancient power to whomever reads it. Prince Trystoferian believed it would give him the power to end the war that claimed the life of his brother. But when he read it, the scroll turned him into a . . . creature. A monster with the sole purpose of wiping out armies to end a war."

As she spoke, the king's face shifted from anger to shock to disbelief.

"I would never have believed this until now. My army is powerful, able to withstand attacks both magical and nonmagical. But recently, my ministers told me some sort of creature is wreaking havoc near the Valtikan mountain pass." He stroked his beard. "How could a scroll turn a man into a monster?"

Valtikan mountain pass? The magic of the scroll must have transported him from Serratura to the battlefront. Elia's stomach sank. The Serraturans hadn't been able to break the curse.

The king sank onto the gold-and-ruby throne and rested his elbows on his knees. "Why did you abandon him in Serratura? What truly happened there?"

Elia gave a brief description of the vaults in the Serraturan library, but she didn't mention the cursechains, spells, and truelock keeping the scroll imprisoned. Nor did she mention the kiss, even though it often kept her up at night. She explained how Trys had read the scroll, and how the words had lifted and affixed themselves to him. How the Serraturans had captured her and Trys, but they had taken him somewhere else while she had barely escaped with her life. Scant details, minimal magic.

When she was done, the king frowned, shaking his head. "So, he infiltrated a closed foreign nation, causing a diplomatic nightmare, and now he's wrecking the advances we've made in this war." He stroked his beard, toying with the gold-and-silver beads braided through the wiry strands. "Can the magic of the scroll be undone?"

Elia's feet began to ache, and sweat ran down the backs of her legs. "I don't know, Your Majesty."

The king's eyebrows rose again. "You helped my nephew potentially permanently curse himself, and you told no one." The king thought for a moment and then let out an exasperated groan. "I love my nephew, but this creature is inhibiting my cause and making victory impossible. He's killing

my soldiers by the dozen. They were his fellow citizens before he was cursed. Many of those men and women, especially the officers, are not strangers to him. This leads me to believe that my nephew is lost to the beast. We need more information about the creature. What are its weaknesses? Does it speak?”

Elia inspected her scuffed shoes and thought of Trys’s warm brown eyes. The way he watched her so intently while he listened to her talk. His devotion to his family and desperation for peace. He’d be devastated if he was aware that he was killing people.

She swallowed hard and cleared her throat. “The last time I was with the prince, he was just beginning to transform. I don’t know what he looks like now or if he even has an awareness of himself.”

“Utterly unhelpful,” the king muttered.

“He only wanted peace. An end to the killing.” She twisted her fingers in her skirt. “His brother, Prince Nikias, inspired his search for a solution.”

The king dragged his hands down his face. Without a room full of courtiers watching, his kingly demeanor transformed to something more normal, more human. The man behind the crown. “The whole court mourned when Prince Nikias died. My own children grieved deeply for a long time. But Trystoferian retreated into his books as his father retreated into bottle after bottle of fine wine and liquor. And his mother retreated into herself and then into the wilds, never to be seen again. His cousins and other aunts and uncles and all the nobles of court said nothing as he pursued distractions far beneath his station. And that’s what we all thought it was. A distraction from his grief. None of us knew how serious it was, how serious *he* was. I would have stopped him sooner.” He paused to take a shuddering breath, closed his eyes, and met Elia’s gaze. “But it’s done. He made his choice, and now this monster threatens the lives of my army and the progress of the war. I can’t allow him to continue, not when our enemies are ever present and doggedly threaten our hold on the gold mines at the border. Our troops cannot withdraw from the battlefield, even with the creature wreaking havoc there, or we risk losing the mines.” The king drummed his fingers on his armrest, brow furrowed. “So now—though as his uncle I don’t want to—as king, I must turn all of my considerable resources toward removing Trystoferian from the area expeditiously. My generals say he is impervious to attacks of both magic and might. So we’ll redouble our efforts—every sorcerer, magician, godstouched priest, anyone in the

kingdom with an inkling of magic will be ordered to focus their efforts on eliminating or containing him. If you have another solution, speak now. Before I do what I must."

Elia's heart drummed against her chest so loudly she was sure he could hear it, and a rush of panic stole her breath as she glanced around the empty courtroom. There had to be something she could do. Some way to stop the king from trying to kill Trys.

The king's eyes glittered with an unspoken plea. It was clear he loved Trys, but his country would always come before his family. Maybe he felt like he was out of options. Maybe she was Trys's last hope.

A soul-deep certainty filled her. She would find a way, whatever it was. She would help Trys *and* get the blood she needed for the rite to save Myron.

"A solution. I don't . . . I don't know." As the king began shaking his head, she dropped to her knees before the throne. "But, Your Majesty, I am begging you. Allow me to try. I will go to the battlefield and confront Trys—the monster—and do what I can to help him. If you please, Your Majesty. If I can make it to him, I'll do everything in my power to save him."

The king rubbed his chin thoughtfully as he considered. "It's not a solution or even much of a plan. And your safety could not be guaranteed," he said. "Our enemies are relentless, and if they continue their attacks, I will be forced to engage them. Regardless of your presence or your plea. You could be killed by friendly fire as easily as by the monster. Are you willing to take that chance?"

Elia nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty. But I'll need a royal writ of travel that allows me to seek quarter from any noble or official in Valdan. Along with a ring of favor so that anyone I meet will have no doubt that I journey with your blessing and act under your command."

"I don't know what you can accomplish where my royal mages and sorcerers have failed thus far. But risking one young Conjurista is preferable to sending more of them." He paused to consider her and seemed to come to a conclusion. "If you understand and accept the risks, you may go with my blessing. Take the writ and the ring and get the monster out of my way as quickly as possible."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." She curtsied and drew in her breath. Now for the part that had kept her awake all night. "I have one final request, if I may."

He glowered. “What else could you possibly want?”

“Your nephew. Prince Trystoferian.”

The king’s dark eyebrows rose in befuddled amusement. “What about him?”

“If I return the prince safely from the battlefield, I want you to uphold the original terms of my contract with the prince. I want to marry him, if he’ll have me.”

He scoffed. “I understand the desire to attain Trystoferian’s wealth and status, but—”

“No,” she dared to interrupt the king. “I’d want him even if he was disowned. If he was a penniless pauper living off charity, I’d still want him. Allow me to marry your nephew if he wishes, and I will do everything in my power to open the path to your gold mine.”

Elia met the king’s searing gaze and did not look away. Finally, the king let out a frustrated grunt and threw his hands in the air.

“Agreed,” he gritted out. “My clerk will draw up the details and deliver the paperwork to Trystoferian’s family estate. Now farewell, Elia Tallis. Do not disappoint me.”

She curtsied and backed out of the throne room. Elia was partly responsible for Trys’s condition. If she’d refused his commission, he would still be here and safe. And yet, he’d given her everything. New life for her siblings. Passage for Papa. Comfort and luxury. A way to save Myron, if she managed to survive completing the rite. And for all of that, he’d become a bloodthirsty monster.

Elia took a deep breath. She’d made mistakes before. Unforgivable ones. But it wasn’t too late to right this wrong. She would find him, and somehow, she’d find a way to bring him back. She would be his new family, the one he deserved after his brother’s passing. He *would* be hers again.

OceanofPDF.com

23

The next evening, Elia had just finished a bowl of leftover stew when a loud knock came from the front door. Rinna-Grivya waited outside, grumpy as ever. Elia ushered her inside and seated her at the dining table. She put her bowl in the sink and poured steaming water from the kettle into two teacups.

“It’s too quiet without the other children here,” Grivya said as she accepted a cup of chamomile tea and a small lavender tart.

Elia smiled sadly. “I can’t get used to it. My thoughts are too loud without them around. What brings you here so late? You seem . . . tired.” The last thing Elia wanted was to offend a powerful witch by critiquing her appearance, but Grivya seemed oddly withdrawn.

Grivya picked at the tart. “I’ve been to visit my coven’s headquarters to divine more information about the rite and confirm the information the king gave you yesterday.”

Elia clutched her own teacup with both hands. “What did you find out?”

“The night you two idiots were caught in the vaults, the Serraturan scholars and medics took Trys to an observation chamber in a hospital. One of my coven sisters specializes in crystal ball readings. She was able to confirm that the curse transformed him into a powerful monster and then whisked him away somewhere. No one in Serratura knew where.”

A lump rose in Elia’s throat, and her face crumpled. “I should never have agreed to take him to Serratura.”

“Of course not, you fool,” Grivya said with a softness that was at odds with her words. “But he chose to read the Scroll of Peace on his own. You couldn’t have known what would happen. He should have done a proper study of the scroll. Never trust a prince’s comprehension of the arcane when witches and librarians are on hand.”

Wisdom like that had been ingrained in Elia since childhood. But she had grown up in a scrappy merchant’s home, and this grouchy hope witch had been around her whole life. Trys only had Nik’s shadow growing up. No one had taught him where to turn for wisdom.

“What will happen to him now? Will he be a beast forever?”

“The scroll bound itself to him, and him to it. Until he dies, the scroll will compel him to any Valdan battlefield to force peace. He will maintain his current form even while there is no war to extinguish.”

Elia’s shoulders drooped as the weight of this news sank in. “How can I stop him?”

Grivya looked at her thoughtfully. “I don’t know. Based on the little I could discover, the Servant of the Scroll is likely invulnerable. Nothing can pierce his flesh, and nothing can stand against what the lore describes as the ‘night of chaos’ he controls.”

Elia went quiet for a moment. “He can’t leave the battlefield while he’s under the scroll’s power. And I need his blood for the rite to save Myron. If the creature’s skin is impenetrable, then he needs to revert to a human form so I can attempt the rite. I don’t know how I’d counteract the scroll’s magic, but I can only hope that if I can, if he transforms back, there is some way I can make it permanent. Some way I can keep him.”

Grivya nodded. “You will need magic, luck, allies, and so many other things that I can’t give you. It’s up to you if it’s worth the risk . . . and the cost.” A slow, sad smile curved Grivya’s cracked lips. “All your options are terrible ones. But I know better than to try to change your mind. If nothing else, I hope this ludicrous quest convinces you to never give up pushing the boundaries of your magic. The roots of your potential reach so much deeper than magical locksmithing, or even cursed vaults. Even so, the effort may take more magic than you have.”

Elia swallowed. “I have to try.”

Grivya paused and let out a long sigh. “I don’t have all the answers, but I can help you find them. But I’ll require a vow.”

Elia reached across the table and squeezed the hope witch’s gnarled hands. “Anything.”

Grivya shook her head but did not let go. Silvery light shone in the witch’s eyes, exposing the affection she so rarely showed. Then she gave a hard nod. “If you choose this path, this is the blood oath you must make to me. You must vow to return before three months’ time has passed, regardless of your success in completing the rite. A turn of the season should be long enough, and your life will be at risk every second of it. If you haven’t accomplished it by then, there’s no hope for removing the godstouch from Myron or returning the prince to his natural state. Make the

best effort you can but know when it’s too late. And then come back home. No prince is worth your life.”

Only three months. Would it be enough? Elia knew that without the witch’s help, she’d have no hope at all to save Trys or Myron. She took a deep breath and nodded.

Grivya pulled an oathstone from her satchel and held it between them.

Elia retrieved a clean knife and made a small cut on her finger. The stone drank her dripping blood as she swore, “I, Elia Tallis, vow to you, Rinna-Grivya, witch of the Great Council, Healer, hope witch, and cherished friend, that I will return home in three months even if I do not succeed in helping the prince return to his mortal form or in freeing my brother from his godstouch. This I swear by blood and breath.”

Elia wrapped her throbbing finger in an enchanted healing bandage from the remains of Saya’s stash. Satisfied that Elia hadn’t left a cheat in her vow, Rinna-Grivya opened a leather pouch and held up an elaborate coronet. It was made of silver and set with enchanted moonstones that flashed with an iridescent fire that shifted when Grivya tilted it. It was the loveliest piece of jewelry Elia had ever seen.

“Is that for me?” Elia breathed.

“You are *borrowing* this from a very generous witch in my coven who enchanted it for you,” Grivya said firmly. “I can’t send you into chaos and darkness without a light. The moonstones will provide light every day except the day of a new moon. Return it to me when you come home.”

She placed the coronet on Elia’s head, securing it with a spell. Tears filled Elia’s eyes. “Thank you, Rinna.”

The witch looked away. “Stop that,” she muttered. “Put away those tears. Let’s discuss your plan.”

They spoke for hours, going over every detail of the journey, the rite, what Grivya knew of the scroll, the towns near Elia’s destination. Finally, when Grivya prepared to leave, Elia stood and threw her arms around the witch, drawing her into an embrace. The old woman’s head did not reach above Elia’s breast, and so Elia held her as she’d held her younger siblings.

Rinna-Grivya pushed away from her. “You’re smothering me. Enough.”

“I’m just so grateful,” Elia breathed.

“Show me your gratitude by staying alive. Keep your oath to me, Elia Tallis. Save your prince, save your brother, but most important, save yourself if things go badly.”

Elia took a deep, steadying breath. “I will, Rinna-Grivya. Will you be here to see me off in the morning?”

“No. You have everything from me that you need. Go with the gods and with courage.”

OceanofPDF.com

24

Elia rode hard for a week, with only the briefest stops to see to her needs, change horses, and stay in the safest inns she could find. The closer she got to the battlefield, the more the towns she traveled through showed evidence of violence. Graveyards sprawled where farmlands once flourished. Abandoned storefronts were pocked with holes, scorched, and left to rot in the elements. Beggars and brigands stalked the alleyways and lanes, so Elia stuck to busier roads as much as possible.

Finally, she reached the vicinity of Lagia, the town hosting the most recent camp of the Valdan army. Haggard soldiers dismantled ragged tents outside town walls. Some were wounded or sick, but they all had the same haunted expression. They were throwing equipment into carts at a nearly inhuman pace. Were they retreating? A man with a golden insignia and medals along the shoulders of his uniform stopped her.

“What are you doing here, young miss? If you’ve come searching for a soldier, go back the way you came and check the weekly vital rosters posted in Chandor. The name will be listed if they were killed. But you can’t stay here.”

Elia reined in her horse. “I have no business with the army. I’m only passing through.”

She tried to sidestep him, but he moved in front of her horse. “Miss, the battlefront is that way. It’s not safe under normal battle circumstances, and it’s certainly not safe now. It’s impassible.”

She was so close to Trys. This random officer was *not* going to block her. Elia sat straight and stared down at the officer with the same *I dare you to try me* look she gave Myron when he fought bedtime.

“I am Lady Elia Lightdragon, bride of Prince Trystoferian Alexios Magnus Felipe Lightdragon, Ninth Prince of Isalindra, Duke of Valdan, Lord of Umbreck Estate.” She paused. It was close enough to the truth. It *would* be the truth, gods help her.

Elia removed her riding glove to show the officer the king’s ring and held out the writ of permission. “King Viktor Lightdragon himself approved

my travels. You will let me pass or you can take it up with the king when you return home."

The officer bristled as he gave a cursory glance at the ring. "Fine. Throw your life away if that's what you want. But no one is coming for you when you find trouble. We're retreating to Chandor for now, and I won't spare a single soldier for a stupid woman with a death wish."

"What's happening on the battlefield?" A creeping sense of dread crawled up her spine. But she needed to know what she was in for.

He glared at her. "As I said, it's impassible. The last company to enter it disappeared before they ever encountered Elantikan soldiers. And now we have to leave before—"

An earsplitting shriek from the distance cut off whatever the officer had been about to say. Shivers ran down her spine, and her heart plummeted to her feet. No human could make that sound. She cringed and glanced down at the officer. He looked sick. A pale sheen glistened on his forehead.

Then she realized. The sound had come from Trys. She was going to have to face *that* to save him, to save Myron.

A moment of indecision made her sway in the saddle. But she had to do this. She found a sliver of steel deep down in her psyche and grabbed hold of it.

"I'm going on now," Elia announced.

The officer shook his head. "Hope you're square with Morthanos, then. Go and die."

Turning around, he barked orders at some of the soldiers who'd slackened their pace to watch them talk. He strode away without speaking further to her, so Elia nudged her horse onward.

She rode against the steady current of departing carts and companies of soldiers toward Lagia. The sky darkened as she drew near the edge of the camp. But it was only midday. A strange line of demarcation stretched across the field. On the active side of the camp, the sky was blue and dotted with occasional puffy clouds. The rest of the camp ahead of her faded into darkness, but the sky above it was not the sky of night. There were no stars, no moon. No guiding light to find her way. She said a prayer to Runa and the gods of night and hoped that Rinna-Grivya's coronet would be enough to light her path.

She dismounted and hoisted her bag onto her back. There was no way she was taking the horse so close to a monster. She led him to a limping

soldier.

“Take good care of him,” Elia instructed. But it wasn’t necessary. The horse nuzzled the soldier and pushed at her chest. The soldier smiled and pulled a partially eaten apple from her pocket, which the horse readily accepted.

The camp gave way to the outskirts of the town of Lagia. Empty townhouses loomed over dirty streets. There were no stray animals. No evidence of life stirred in what had once been a small but prosperous village. Even the birds were quiet. On the far side of the town, Elia entered a pocked field of wet, heavily trodden grass. Her boots squelched loudly in the mud as she walked in the dim silence. This was the plain before the Valtikan Mountains that separated her country of Valdan and their enemies in Elantika. She should have been able to see the mountains rising high into the sky. The coveted pass with its gold mines, the source of the war, was only about seven leagues ahead. But at the edge of the gloaming, only a wall of impenetrable night lay ahead of her. An ominous curtain of opaque black. She held her breath and stepped across the line.

Immediately, a soft glow like gentle moonlight emanated from the coronet, casting a dome of light around her. It was just enough for her to see several steps ahead, and no more. How was she supposed to find Trys in the absolute dark of the field?

The temperature dropped as she traveled on. She’d brought a heavy cloak, but even that wasn’t enough. If only she’d worn more layers. Far away, another shriek pierced the air. But no other sounds disrupted the eerie quiet of the cursed field. She called for Trys, but the darkness seemed to swallow her voice.

Her boot pressed against something loose. Elia looked down, and there, just inside the glow of her coronet, was a severed human arm. Bile rose and fear descended. She turned and sprinted back for the twilight, but it was too late. Carnage was everywhere. Not battle carnage. No human could have done this to other humans. To *a whole field* of other humans. Had . . . had *Trys* done this? A surge of dizziness swept over her. Out. She had to get out of here. She turned and sprinted back toward the safety of Lagia.

OceanofPDF.com

25

Elia woke up screaming in a stranger's bed. The moon glow of her coronet had barely been enough to keep her from tripping over grisly battle remains as she'd fled back to the empty border town and found shelter in this abandoned townhouse in Lagia.

She had been so unprepared for this. Had she really thought she could just waltz onto a battlefield, find her monster, and claim him? Ask him to return to his human state so he could kiss her again, and also could she please have his blood for a divine ritual to undermine the power of the god he was a harbinger of? How stupid. She was underequipped and alone, with no way of finding him. She needed a witch to have a chance. Not just one, a whole coven.

Elia consulted her map as she picked at the porridge she'd managed to make from the pantry's scant supplies. The next-closest town, Risson, was fifteen miles to the south. During their planning, Rinna-Grivya had mentioned her sister coven in Risson. Grivya had said they were strange—whatever that meant by witches' standards—but maybe they'd be willing to offer some kind of help.

Six hours later, Elia entered the outskirts of Risson, footsore and sweaty. It might have been a thriving town before the war. Now beggars clustered on street corners. Half the houses were boarded up, and gangs of ruffians patrolled the alleys looking for easy marks. According to Grivya, the coven was located in a large house on the edge of town. But Grivya hadn't been specific about how to find them, so Elia would have to ask for help.

She found a scrawny, bored boy who looked like he hadn't had a full meal in weeks. He was propped against the wall of the house, as though he couldn't decide between making trouble and watching it.

"A silver if you take me to the most powerful witch in town," she offered.

"What kind of witch?" He tried to seem casual, but his eyes had gleamed at the mention of silver.

“Any kind.” In a town this close to the threat of the war, all the witches would be living together for safety.

He studied Elia, probably deciding whether he could haggle or swindle her.

She sighed. “A silver if you guide me to the witch. Two silvers if I arrive with my purse and person intact.”

He shoved his hands into his worn pockets and rocked on his feet. “Can’t protect you from gangs or thieves. And make it seven silvers.”

“You can show me the quickest, safest way, right? Five silvers.”

The boy led her through abandoned alleys and a maze of side streets to an estate on the outskirts of Risson.

“After the lord got killed in the war and his family left, the witches took over his place. Hope you done witch business before. They’re nasty when you disrespect them,” he said with an air of authority. Like she’d never dealt with a touchy witch.

In the end, she gave him a gold piece out of sympathy. Her siblings might have been a breath away from this life if she hadn’t met Trys. When they reached the estate gate, the boy melted back into the alley shadows, disappearing down the unfamiliar streets.

Elia rang the bell. A warm female voice filled the air around her.

“Welcome to Spellsong Manor. If you’re here for healing, come back on a Fifth Day. If you’re here for enchanting or conjuring, we only do that on First and Third Days. We’re closed on Fourth and Seventh Days. We reserve Sixth Days for mysteries and miscellaneous dark arts. For spells, curses, and prophecies, today’s your day. All payments must be made in full at time of service. No credits or tabs. Customers will be seen on a first come, first served basis. The witches at Spellsong Manor reserve the right to refuse service to anyone for any reason at any point in the service appointment. Currently, you are first in the queue, so please approach the manor’s main entrance and prepare to explain your request.”

Then silence fell. Elia proceeded up the walk with caution.

The witch on the porch hardly looked up from her knitting. A shining cascade of bloodred hair fell over her shoulders. Elia slowed her steps. Should she ring the doorbell or seek access from the witch? She was just about to ask when she noticed the basket next to the witch. It should have been filled with woolen yarn, but instead coil after coil of hair was piled in the basket. Every shade and texture were represented.

Before she could stop herself, Elia blurted, “Is that *human* hair?”

The witch looked up, creamy white skin wrinkling in perplexity as her brows rose. Her eyes were the amber of sunlit honey. Everything about her was beautiful to the point that she was nearly painful to look at. “I take payments in beauty.”

“Why?”

The witch shrugged, her full dark lips curving into a smile. “People don’t need it right now. What use is beauty when you’re running from a war? But *I* can always find a purpose for it.” Then she paused and looked Elia up and down. Assessing her worth, likely. “You’re lovely enough to make a payment or two. What do you seek, Conjurista?”

Elia started. How had the witch known her gift? But years of Rinna-Grivya’s rough tutelage had taught her not to question witches too closely.

“I seek a way to enter the shadowed battlefield guarded by the Scroll of Peace.”

“Only to enter it? Not cross it? For what purpose?” The witch looped strands of dark brown waves around her needles.

Never lie to a witch, Rinna-Grivya had once warned her. *We know the scent of lies. They taste like ash on our tongue.* But an omission wasn’t a lie, and there was no way to know how the witch would use any information she gave.

“I want to find the monster who forces peace.”

The witch harumphed in disappointment. “I won’t be able to help you, I’m afraid.” She waved a needle at the door, and the bell jingled. “Go inside and ask for Claralily, the witch of mysteries. Arcane beasts are ugly and lead to ugly ends. Undignified. Come back to me if you want fortune or love.”

Elia bowed deeply to the witch and touched her forefinger to her brow. “My respects.”

The witch gave a dazzling smile. “What a well-mannered girl.”

The mansion was bright and airy. Vases of flowers from every season sat on tables and counter spaces, sweetly scenting the crisp air. Bread was baking somewhere deeper in the house. Elia’s stomach rumbled in response. She hadn’t eaten since she’d left the townhouse in Lagia that morning.

“My, my, you sound properly hungry,” a lilting voice said. Elia turned. A blue-haired witch in a paint-speckled dress smiled at her. The witch was

holding a paintbrush and standing before a mural of a lush garden in spring. “Welcome to our home. Were you looking for someone in particular?”

“The mistress on the porch directed me to Claralily.”

A spark flashed in the witch’s green eyes. “You have a mystery, then? I am Claralily.”

“Yes. I suppose it is a mystery. My friend”—Elia paused when Claralily quirked an eyebrow—“Well, my fiancé, he read the Scroll of Peace.”

Claralily dropped the paintbrush and dashed over to Elia. She grabbed Elia’s hands, smearing bright pink paint on Elia’s palms, and closed her eyes. “Hmm, yes. I sense it. Your . . . *friend* is in as much trouble as he’s made, then. What a wonder he has become. What a terror. Come.” She grinned with a mouth full of pointed teeth, and a forked tongue flicked over her lips. Elia had to force herself not to flinch. “Let’s discuss his problem.”

Claralily dragged Elia to the kitchen, where the smell of baking bread overwhelmed every other thought. The petite witch swept her short blue curls behind her ear and then bustled around the kitchen preparing tea. As she worked, she asked Elia rapid-fire questions about Trys and the Scroll of Peace and Serratura. In the end, Elia told her almost everything. She even told her about Myron being taken by the death temple.

After draining the dregs of her tea, Claralily raised an indigo eyebrow and said, “You are an unbinding Conjurista with the power to break into the famed vaults of Serratura, and yet you’ve been struggling to make ends meet because you’ve only been making keys to match your father’s doors?”

Elia met her stare. Don’t rise to the bait. Don’t take offense or else the witch would know how to manipulate her and might try to broker a one-sided bargain. “That vault nearly killed me.”

“There are other vaults that people might pay you to open.”

“I’m no thief!”

“Aren’t you? Wouldn’t the people of Serratura say that you are? In any case, all the lore surrounding the Scroll of Peace is consistent in that its wielder shall bear it until death. Your love is gone, my dear.”

What did this mystery witch know about Queen . . . what was her name? And what did the witch know about Trys either? Elia crossed her arms. “With respect, I only came to find a way *to* him. *I’ll* decide if there is anything I can do to help him.”

The witch laughed in a graceful peal like wind chimes. “Oho, so the brazen Conjurista hopes to save her prince despite all sense and reason. And

yet you won’t even bother to stretch your power beyond unlocking doors someone else enchants. You have no idea what you could achieve if you embraced the full range of your magic. But you squander it with filched magic from your father. Do you believe you’re the hero in this story?”

Hero? This story had no hero. Just a stupid girl and a stupider prince trying to right their wrongs. How many times did she have to learn the lesson of *not* pursuing her potential? People always got hurt, and this time it was Trys. “I just want to get him back. Or at least try.”

Claralily leaned forward, eyes narrowing. “Do you even know what happens on that field? What your prince has done? What he attracts with that absolute darkness? Let me tell you. He kills all who enter that field with any intent to prolong the war. The soldiers who were fighting when he arrived died instantly, and no one can recover their bodies. As his curse spreads and deepens, monsters of night and chaos are drawn to it. Creatures who live in hollows and feast on despair, suffering, and fear. Even if you didn’t draw your monstrous friend’s ire, you wouldn’t survive on that field for an hour.” She paused, studying Elia’s face. “Go home, girl. Forget the brash prince and this forsaken place. Give your brother to the temple and make a more profitable use of your talents.”

Fire ignited in Elia’s gut. She’d come too far for some witch living the easy life in a manor to tell her it was hopeless. “That’s not going to happen.” Their faces were only an arm’s width apart as they took each other’s measure. The witch needed to understand that Elia could no more abandon her brother to the life of a Deathfate or Trys to that nightmarish existence than she could rip her magic from her blood. “You’re the witch of mysteries. What will it take to save him? What’s the answer?”

Claralily was silent for a moment, absently stroking her chin. Finally, she put her hands behind her head and tilted back in her chair. “Mysteries don’t have answers. They have resolutions. Sometimes.” Her eyes sparked with something like mischief. “How you deal with your prince is up to you. But I can offer some help. For a price.”

Elia reached for her purse. But the witch was shaking her head.

“Gold is boring. I deal in even trades. Goods for goods, magic for magic. As I see it, you need three things.” Claralily held up three narrow, perfectly manicured fingers and counted off each item. “First, transportation. You need a way to get around quickly. If you must walk to Risson each time you need anything, you’ll wear through your boots in a

month. And boots are very precious around here. Second, food. You need rations to last between your trips here. Third, protection. You need to stay safe from the creatures that thrive in the dark. Let's make some trades."

This could get interesting. Witches who shunned gold for trade weren't usually concerned with everyday goods. "What kind of transportation do you have?"

Claralily smiled. "A bicycle, enchanted to carry you at the speed of a running horse. I traded for it with an Enchanter who couldn't figure out where his wife kept going every Fifth Day." She cackled. "Some mystery. She was bedding a blacksmith."

Elia sipped her tea. "And what do you want in exchange?"

"Give me the king's letter and ring and the bicycle is yours."

The witch could claim hospitality from any noble in Valdan with that letter and ring. She could trade it to anyone. The king *did* say to do whatever she needed to save Trys. And traveling between towns quickly would make this whole endeavor easier.

"Done." Elia pulled off the ring and slid it across the table. When she handed the folded letter to Claralily, the witch grinned and vanished them with a wave of her hand. Elia's stomach growled loudly. "And food?"

Claralily rose and walked to the kitchen counter, where a steaming loaf of bread rested on a cooling rack. "You're in luck today. I have a fresh loaf of vitapane." She carved a thick slice and slathered it with butter before handing it to Elia. "Here's a sample."

Elia sniffed it. She wasn't going to just shove random food she didn't recognize into her mouth. It may have looked like harmless bread, but with a witch, you could never be too careful.

"What is it?"

Claralily lifted a brow. "It's bread, dear." She said this slowly, as if speaking to a particularly dim child. "Oh, for the gods' sakes. I'll eat a slice with you."

She cut a significantly smaller slice for herself, buttered it, and lifted it to her mouth. "Dig in," she said wryly as she took a bite.

Elia took a cautious bite. It tasted like . . . nothing. It had the texture of a hearty brown bread. No flavor whatsoever. Claralily dabbed her mouth and smiled at Elia.

"*Vitapane* contains all the essentials your body needs to survive. It's enchanted to offer a meal's worth of nutrition in each slice. But the magic

leaches the flavor."

"I can see how that's useful, but how will one loaf help me?"

"When you reach the last slice of bread, let it dry out completely. Give the dried piece three drops of your blood. And hum the proper incantation. The bread will take your blood and magic and transform into a new loaf. Simple!"

Elia gagged. "You mean your *blood* is in this bread?"

Claralily raised her brows. "Not sure why that bothers you. There was once blood in a lot of the food you eat. Besides, the bread just uses it as fuel and transforms into new bread. It's not like it's going to seep out."

Elia wanted to protest, but this would help her survive in a hostile environment with no other food. It was the best she could do. "Fine. What do you want in exchange?"

Claralily demonstrated the bread's incantation and set the rest of the loaf on the table next to Elia. Then she said, "Conjure the key that will unlock this book." She pulled a small leather book bound by a simple padlock out of her pocket. Elia touched it, and the book shocked her. "Yes, that's a cursechain and a teeny-tiny truelock. Good thing you know how to open those."

Elia eyed Claralily with suspicion. "What's in this book?"

Claralily shrugged. "Nothing dangerous. The previous owner was a very private person. Thus the protections."

"If I open this, I'll be weak for hours."

Claralily pursed her lips. "A deal is a deal."

Runa take all witches. Elia blew out a breath and lifted the book to her lips. She glanced at Claralily. "This is the only way I can open a truelock." Claralily nodded in assent.

She slid her tongue over the truelock and hummed the same incantation she had in Serratura. The cursechain melted in her hands and landed in a sparking pool on the table. Nausea churned in her stomach. But a tiny key formed along her tongue. A steel skeleton key. She pulled it out and handed it to Claralily.

"Fascinating. And thank you. I'll throw in a bottle of healing sanadew potion for strength on your journey home. Free of charge." Claralily stood and walked to a cabinet with glass doors. Vials of every size and color lined the shelf in neat rows. Claralily held up a teal bottle and swirled the

contents. “This should do the trick. You’ll be good as new before you leave. Drink up.”

The familiar scent dragged up memories of drinking tea in a prison cell. Without the tea, it wouldn’t sedate her, but in its undiluted state, the potion tasted like sugar and rot. Elia pinched her nose and downed the entire bottle. Sweet restoration poured through her aching muscles, and Elia exhaled in relief. “And protection?”

Claralily settled back across the table from Elia. “Perhaps a warded cloak.” She gave Elia an appraising look. “But all your clothes are so boring. I’d want cloth for cloth. Enchanted in some way, preferably.”

A pang stabbed through Elia’s heart. Though she had just such a cloth with her, she hadn’t meant to part with it. But for Myron’s and Trys’s sakes, she could do it. A cloth was just a cloth, and worthless compared with their lives. “I have the finest threadlore in Valdan in my satchel, but it’s worth more than any cloth in your possession.”

“That’s a tall claim.” Claralily’s eyes sparked in interest.

Elia pulled out the scarf Orin had given her on his last night in the house before leaving for his royal apprenticeship. It glimmered as the tale shifted in the light. It was an adventure tale. Her favorite kind. Claralily inhaled sharply and ran the silk through her fingers.

“You didn’t exaggerate. What would you want in exchange for this?”

The battlefield had been full of carnage and danger. There was no way to find shelter in that wretched place, and she couldn’t make daily trips to the battlefield from the abandoned house in Lagia if she wanted to make progress finding Trys. “I need a way to find shelter on the battlefield.”

“Hmm.” Claralily tapped her chin. “Are you willing to work with a nonhuman?” Claralily withdrew a small silver flute from her pocket and rolled it between her fingers as she waited for Elia’s response.

“If they’re an ally, I suppose that’s fine.” An ally didn’t need to be human to save her life.

“Excellent.” The witch clapped. “Let me teach you how to summon a Void Shifter.”

OceanofPDF.com

26

The next day, Elia set off for the battlefield from her borrowed townhouse in Lagia. She left her bicycle hidden in a storage shed near the townhouse. There was no sense in trying to ride in the dark, not with the amount of carnage she'd have to avoid.

Claralily had told her how to summon and snare a Void Shifter. They had the power to shape darkness, the witch had said, bending it to their whims and making it solid. They usually lived in the deepest crevices, near mountain hearts far below the surface. But a field of completely impenetrable dark would be irresistible to them. Claralily had told her to trap and threaten one of them. To get violent if needed. Somehow, that didn't feel right. Perhaps Elia could coax one to appear and make a bargain.

Never bargain with creatures of dark and light, elements, or energy. They are greedy and deceitful by nature. Papa had told Elia that at the beginning of her training. She was never to open doors into dens belonging to magical creatures of light or shadow because she might be forced to bargain her way home. But today it was necessary.

Weak amber light filtered through fine mists on the shadow plains that ended abruptly in the utter darkness of the battlefield. The deep blue sky was riven by a jagged line. Everything beyond that was concealed by a cursed black veil. Elia brushed her fingers against her moonglow coronet. Hopefully it wouldn't offend the Void Shifter. She took a last glance back at the blue sky and bright light of fading day before entering the field.

The darkness was anything but empty. It had its own presence. One that brushed against her, probing, sensing. Who was she? What was she doing here? Why did she wear light into its den? Beyond the darkness itself, Elia could sense the watchfulness of other creatures. Her spine prickled with the sensation.

The scent of salt and the tang of sulfur and metal clung heavily to the air. It was an unholy mingling of blood and magic and death. Refusing to look where she stepped, she walked as far as she dared into the field and

then stopped. Elia silently prayed to Runa for protection, but who knew if the goddess could see this place that was dark both day and night?

The witch of mysteries hadn't bothered to describe what a Void Shifter looked like. They had to be terrifying if they thrived in a place like this. When she reached an area that was seemingly untouched by violence, Elia wrapped her cloak closely around her and knelt. Dead grass crunched under her knees. She raised the flute to her lips, as instructed by Claralily.

The tune came easily. The witch had made her play it until her fingers ached and her lips were numb. Then Elia sang the verses that accompanied the song. The lack of rhyme had made the lyrics difficult to remember, but Claralily had said it was a translation of an ancient tongue long forgotten. Elia hummed the tune first and then began singing.

"Creatures of night. Inhabitants of shadow. Hear my song. Come to my call. Oh, creatures that live in the depths between the stars. Lovers of void and darkness. Heed me now. I come on my knees, a supplicant. I come with lifted hands to bargain for your help. I call upon the Void Shifter, wielder of the night. Hear my request and grant me safety while I make it." For good measure, she hummed the tune all the way through once more.

Rustling disrupted the quiet outside the ring of her coronet's soft glow. A beat of silence. Then more rustling. Elia held her breath. Her hands began to shake with cold, causing the charms on her bracelet to tinkle. The rustling came closer. It sounded like it came from everywhere at once, but she could see nothing. Should she sing again? A tiny breeze brushed her face. It smelled of dirt and dead leaves. She shivered and stood.

Something pushed across her boots and then encircled her legs. It wound around and around her, constricting just enough that she couldn't move. Elia tried to slow her breathing and calm her thudding pulse. She glanced down and nearly fainted when she saw coil after coil of an enormous black snake's tail wrapping around her.

Except . . . no snake could survive in this cold emptiness. There was no prey to keep it fed, no sun to keep it warm. This was the enchanted dark of monsters. It had to be the creature she'd summoned. The fiend of legend who could manipulate the darkness itself into solid matter, one who could wield the very night. A Void Shifter.

She stayed perfectly still, hands lifted, palms up. It took every fiber of her restraint to keep her breathing even, to not run screaming back to the abandoned town on the border of this cursed place. Then, slowly, so slowly

that it almost seemed reluctant, the Void Shifter slithered into the ring of gentle light from her coronet.

If Claralily had described this monster to her, Elia never would have risked summoning it. Her stomach tied in knots as she took in the full view. The Void Shifter had an upper body somewhat resembling a centipede, but with three eyes, two towering antennae, and dozens of arms. Its body was covered in black scales that extended down the length of an enormous snake tail. Its round, red eyes squinted against the coronet's moonglow.

"Well, well," he said, his voice a deep rumble, like the roll of water over river stones, ancient and unknowable, "what has the darkness gifted me? Why have you come here, child of sunlight?"

"I've come to bargain with you," she said in a near whisper.

Just past him, on the edge of her vision, another monster approached. It was an enormous winged scorpion, with a head, torso, and arms that looked human. Chills raced over her body.

But that face. She *knew* that face. Had kissed those lips.

"Trys," she breathed, even as her pulse hammered in her chest. He gave no indication that he recognized her.

The Void Shifter turned his head toward Trys in a slow, assessing manner. Elia couldn't look away from the monster he had become. The words of Myron's first prophecy echoed in her mind. *The harbinger of destruction will walk in the valley of the dead.* Her heart broke as she took in his new form. There was barely a trace of her scholar prince left.

His eyes were dark pits of void black, and his arms were much more muscular now. The curse-script glinted crimson and silver against his skin. His barbed tail was a dark carmine in the pale glow of her coronet, and it was thicker than several men, lashing wildly as he watched her. He had six enormous legs in addition to his human arms. Within the Void Shifter's grip, Elia trembled. Trys had become a thing of nightmares. A creature unknowable.

He watched the Void Shifter with detached interest, pincers snapping and tail flashing in a wordless warning. Slithering to her side, the Void Shifter placed Elia between Trys and himself. The Void Shifter cocked his head in a smooth, inhuman gesture, but his expression did not change from mild curiosity.

"Bury your fear, child. The peace enforcer will slaughter me if I harm you without his permission. Tell me what you want and be gone. You stink

of sunlight and growing things, and I don't wish to be near you for long."

She gulped. It would be so easy for the Void Shifter to crush her before she could cry out, before Trys could even flinch. If he'd bother to help her.

"Void Shifter—" she began, but he interrupted.

"I have a name. Not that you asked. It's Solbane. Why don't you start with a polite introduction, so we aren't reduced to calling each other by our species names, *human*?"

"My name is Elia." Her hands trembled, but if Solbane noticed, he didn't let on.

"You spoke of a bargain, Elia. Make your request."

"I need a place to stay on this field. A shelter, preferably a house of some sort. Something to keep out the mon . . . the others and the night." Something told her the listening creatures nearby would be offended by the term *monsters*.

"A shelter?" The coils of Solbane's tail flexed around her hips. "You mean to stay here? For what purpose?"

Was he . . . nervous? Perhaps he was afraid of being hunted. Elia couldn't draw a full breath, so she jerked her chin toward Trys, who still stood silent, intently watching them.

"For him," she wheezed.

Behind her, Trys must have stepped slightly closer, because Solbane's head whipped toward him in one graceful swoop. Then he looked back at Elia. "You will swear to leave me and mine alone during your stay?"

"If you do the same. I don't want to be eaten."

He hissed a laugh that sounded like crackling leaves in the wind. "Don't be repulsive. I don't eat anything that has been touched by the sun. I prefer moles, creeping worms, bats. Night-seasoned things. But . . ." He paused, insectile head tilting. "I am curious about your kind and how you live under that hateful yellow fireball." He tapped his chin thoughtfully. "I will build your house of night in exchange for your dreams."

"My dreams?"

He gave a slow nod, as if confirming to himself that this was a good bargain. "Yes. You will sleep here tonight and hold the image of your shelter in your mind. I have no idea what humans consider an adequate house. My palaces are vast caverns and mountain hearts carved by time and the slow drip of ancient water. You must picture what is suitable for you.

Nothing too big. And that will be the last dream you have. The rest will be mine. Forever.”

They haggled over several more details. She would keep all light except her coronet contained to the house’s interior. He would set repellant wards around the house to keep away any unfriendly creatures. She would not bring guests into the house, with the exception of Trys. The exception amused Solbane for some reason, and his tail tightened painfully around her as he laughed. For protection, the door would be locked, and she would create a key that she alone could use. Elia would sleep despite losing her dreams. He would have all her dreams, good and bad alike. In the end, they sealed their bargain in blood, his silver mingling with her red in a swirl of pink between their joined palms.

He placed his enormous hand on her head to claim her dreams, and her whole body tingled. With their bargain sealed, his serpentine body uncoiled from hers, and the chill of the absolute dark rushed at her.

“When you feel tired, simply lie down, and I’ll come to fulfill our arrangement.”

“Wait. Won’t you stay with me? Am I not in danger from”—she waved her hand around—“Everything here?”

He gave a slow, predatory smile full of sword-length serrated teeth. “I thought you knew that before you came here, Elia, child of the sun. Nothing here is friendly to humans.” He glanced toward Trys. “But as long as he’s around, no one will attack you.” He slithered back a short distance. “I have other things to occupy my time. I’ll return when you sleep.” He watched her for a moment before fully retreating into the blackness outside the glow of her coronet.

How was she supposed to sleep on a battlefield surrounded by monsters, carnage, and unnatural darkness? There were still hours yet before she would have gone to bed, even under normal circumstances. She turned, but Trys was nowhere in sight. He must have left when Solbane had, but hopefully he wasn’t far away. Just in case. The darkness pressed in on her. What else was lurking outside her field of vision?

And that was when Elia heard it. Crying. Not a human cry. The wails of a trapped animal. Before she could put much thought into it, she was heading toward the sound. She had to walk slowly to avoid rocks and sudden dips in the field. But the creature continued its baleful moans. As

she grew closer, Elia could make out occasional clinking between the wails. Like metal on metal.

She stopped when the cries seemed loudest. “Where are you?” she called softly into the emptiness, which was certainly not empty.

The wailing stopped. Sniffing. Scuffling. Clinking. Then low, rumbling snarls as a creature prowled into the coronet glow. Undiluted terror consumed her senses. It was a Slyn.

The monster that children were convinced lurked in dark corners, partially open closets, and under beds. Its long, lithe body was covered in a mass of unruly black fur. Just a little smaller than a bear, a true Slyn would never have fit in any corner, closet, or under-bed space. Elia’s heart pounded so hard she could feel her pulse in her throat.

Weak eyesight by day and perfect night vision meant that Slyns were nocturnal predators. They were drawn to fear, blood, and solitary, defenseless creatures, a fact that inspired all the scary stories about children being eaten while alone in bed. According to all their lore, Slyns never forgot a scent. One whiff, and they could find an object or person a world away. But they were vicious. This one had left deep claw marks scored into the earth around it. Something clinked behind it. A chain.

“Hello there. Why are you here?” Stupid. The creatures didn’t speak, and probably couldn’t understand her either.

If it was chained, it couldn’t get her. She should run very, very far away, while she still could. Where was Trys? Shouldn’t he be concerned that the Slyn might cause violence on his field? Unlike Solbane, who could speak and reason, the Slyn was a pure predator.

The Slyn lunged toward her and let out a yelp. A leg-hold trap dug into its left hind leg. The trap had a small keyhole on it, the only way it could be opened. If she ran and left it, the Slyn would become prey for other creatures here. It deserved a fighting chance as much as she did. She took a hesitant step toward it. It backed up, snarling and exposing its arm-length, razor-sharp teeth. A mouth full of daggers.

“I could free you,” she offered quietly. “I’m a key Conjurista. Opening locks is what I do.”

The Slyn roared, keeping its teeth bared. She pointed at the trap until the Slyn looked at the lock and then back at her. Black blood oozed from its wound and coated the teeth of the trap.

“Or I could leave.” She took a step back.

The Slyn whimpered. It looked at the trap. Then at her. Then at the trap. It whimpered again.

“If I free you, will you attack me? Will you kill and eat me?”

It only whined and lay down. Answer enough. She moved tentatively toward the trap. Curse her inability to leave well enough alone. This was going to get her killed before she even had a chance to attempt the rite, let alone to save Trys.

She bent over the trap. The Slyn had not moved. It watched her, eyes full of fear and pain. So she said in soothing tones, “I swear I won’t hurt you. The trap will hurt when it opens, but I won’t harm you.”

She had no idea how much, if anything, it could understand. But it made no move toward her. Slowly, ever so slowly, Elia extended her fingers toward the trap. The Slyn snarled.

“I’m only reaching for the trap. Be calm. Be still.”

Her fingertips brushed against the sticky metal, and the Slyn yelped. If she applied any pressure, it would cause pain. She’d need to work quickly. Fortunately, the lock mechanism was simple and nonmagical, so she wouldn’t need to put her mouth directly on it. The trap had probably been laid before the battle, intended for an unwary enemy soldier. As she lightly caressed the lock, its complete outline formed in her mind.

Elia hummed the incantation to conjure a key. Warmth spread over her right palm, and a key formed as she sang. In a single breath, she shoved the key in, turned it, and jumped back when the trap popped open.

The Slyn pulled its leg free and then slowly limped toward her, head lowered. Blood still trickled from the trap wound. Even with a lowered head, the Slyn stood chest high. Her heart stuttered, and her knees went liquid. What had she been thinking? She should have just let the creature stay trapped. She would have been safe, or as safe as one could be on a battlefield full of monsters. It inhaled deeply and sniffed all around her. Then it hobbled into the blackness.

Elia spent hours wandering aimlessly, hoping and fearing she would find Trys, searching for high ground and for the borders of this dreadful place. She found nothing but abandoned weapons and scraps of uniforms. There were no bodies in sight this far from the battlefield’s border. She grimaced and decided not to dwell on why that might be. Whenever she bent to pick up an ax or a sword, Trys’s pincers snapped and clicked nearby in warning.

Perhaps any sort of battle, even one to save her life, even one separate from the war, was forbidden on this field. Perhaps the Slyn had known that somehow, and that was why it had left her alone.

When her feet grew heavy and she could barely keep her eyes open, Elia stopped. She had not seen signs of any living things for some time. She was on a flat, even rock in the plains. Though anything could be just outside her coronet glow, it seemed as good a place as any for her house. She sat and drew her knees to her chest and focused.

A cottage would be nice. Something with a den, a kitchen, a washroom, and a bed. A dresser. A kitchen table. A comfortable, overstuffed chair by a hearth. She pictured something simple and cozy. Something she could make a temporary home. Her hold on consciousness loosened.

Hours later—or was it minutes? It was impossible to tell in this place—she startled awake at the sound of a rumbling snarl.

Her head snapped up. The Slyn was standing over her. When had he arrived? He growled viciously, every dagger tooth exposed. But it wasn't directed at her. Solbane waited nearby, tail coiled tight.

"Your new pet wouldn't leave you alone," he said through gritted teeth.

The Slyn had found her. She shouldn't have been surprised. It could have tracked her scent to the ends of the world. Its fur bristled, matted with blood and dirt on its wounded leg. The Slyn's back was to her. Elia didn't know much about the creatures, but she understood enough about animals to know that the stance it was taking was not a threat to her. It was guarding her. From Solbane. Why?

"This is very inconvenient," Solbane called with some amusement. "I had to put your house over there." He waved vaguely behind her. "I'd hoped you'd wake up inside. But he wouldn't let me get close."

"What should I do?" Maybe one monster could advise against another. "Is he going to eat me?"

Solbane hissed a laugh. "Stop thinking everything is out to eat you. That's offensive. He appears to think you are an ally and I'm a threat. How interesting. Humans are much more of a threat to Slyns than my kind. Just tell him to calm down. Touch him, if you dare."

An aggressive snapping sound made Elia's breath catch. Trys was here, barely inside the coronet glow. His pincers were raised as if in anticipation of a fight. Solbane threw up two of his many arms in a surprisingly human gesture of frustration.

“My part of this bargain is complete. You have a house behind you. It’s exactly to the specifications you dreamed. And tonight, during my rest cycle, I’ll see your dreams. I even made sure nothing attacked you while you slept, not that I needed to. There’s no reason for me to stay any longer.”

“What should I do about the Slyn?”

Solbane shrugged. “Looks like he’s giving *you* the choice of friend or foe.”

Before she could ask more questions, Solbane slipped back into the darkness. The Slyn’s breathing slowed. He sat in front of her, glaring at Trys. Daring him to come closer. Maybe the Slyn didn’t realize that Trys could rip him in half without even trying. But Trys left as well. While the Slyn was watching Trys go, Elia stood. The creature stood too. He butted his head gently—or what he must’ve thought was gently—against her waist. She stumbled a bit.

“What is this?” she asked softly. “Are we friends now?”

His head butted her again, and she almost fell. He was waiting for something. This was either going to be the dumbest mistake she’d ever made, or . . . She reached out a hand and squeezed her eyes shut. A velvet nose pressed into her palm. Smelling. It moved up her arm, bringing that mouth full of daggers closer. She held her breath. Panic would only frighten or anger the creature. But all he did was smell her. His nose ran over her whole body. Memorizing her scent. She lowered her arm onto the creature’s back. The fur was stiff and smooth. He froze. She rubbed her hand down his back in a careful caress, not unlike how she’d pet a nervous dog.

“It’s okay,” she cooed. “I guess we *are* friends. You have nothing to fear from me.”

He stepped back and sat. Watching her. She had actually touched a Slyn and survived. He had protected her. No one would ever believe this. *She* could barely believe it. But she couldn’t go on calling him Slyn. Not if she wanted to face him without fear in the future.

“I need to give you a name.” He quirked his head. “It’s for my own peace of mind. I need to call you something so silly that I couldn’t possibly be afraid of you. Unless you already have a name?”

He simply stared at her. Right. Why would a creature who was practically a demon of legend and dread have a name? But he had protected her and had been surprisingly gentle.

“Cuddles. Will you respond to that?” A gentle name for a gentle monster. He stepped forward and nudged her, slightly more softly this time. “Cuddles, follow me.”

She walked a short distance from him, and after a moment, he followed. But she couldn’t tell if he’d followed out of curiosity or because she’d called him. Perhaps he could understand more speech than she’d thought.

“That wound on your leg is going to fester unless we treat it. May I bandage it?”

Cuddles just watched her, waiting. She reached into her pack and pulled out an enchanted bandage. There was no way of knowing if the healing magic would work on a Slyn. In all of history, it was unlikely that anyone had ever bandaged one. He let her wrap it around his leg and tie it off. When she was done, he nuzzled his head into her stomach. Maybe he’d stay with her. Maybe he’d leave. Either way, she’d done all she could for him. It was time to see how her bargain with Solbane had paid off.

“Cuddles, stay here,” Elia said when they finally arrived at Solbane’s creation. Cuddles sat and watched mere steps from the threshold, standing guard over her house made of night.

OceanofPDF.com

27

The house was small but cozy, with a hearth, a narrow bed, a comfortable chair, a small table, and a serviceable kitchen. Solbane's magic was truly incredible. There were even colors here and there in the cottage, but they were muted, as though seen through a fog.

The cabinets were empty. The hearth was cold. What would happen if she lit a fire in a house made of darkness? She quickly unloaded her sad little stash of food into one of the cabinets. Dried fruit and meat, the vitapane, a hard wedge of cheese. Most of it wouldn't last her long. She would have to return to the townhouse and take her bicycle to Risson.

She tried not to think about the Leonins' pastries as she slung an empty bag over her shoulder. Hopefully, Maisie was doing well and visiting Myron as often as she could. A pang of homesickness swept over Elia. If only there were a way to end this and get back to Isalindra quickly. But Trys wouldn't even stay in her presence long enough for her to determine what to do.

Deciding to mull it over as she traveled, Elia grabbed her empty bag and stepped out the front door. Cuddles jumped to his feet and nearly gave her a heart attack. It was going to take time to get used to a Slyn following her around. If he stayed.

For a moment, she stood utterly still, waiting for something to happen. But the darkness remained undisturbed. It was going to be impossible to find her way back to the townhouse. She had wandered for hours before Solbane made her house. Who knew how far from Lagia she'd drifted? Without help, she could walk the battlefield in circles forever and never know it.

"Solbane?" she whispered into the darkness. "Solbane, are you there?" No answer.

Cuddles looked disapprovingly at her. Maybe he could help. She went into the house and returned with a towel from the abandoned townhouse, holding it out to Cuddles.

"Can you help me find the house this came from?"

Cuddles sniffed deeply and then sauntered ahead. A few steps outside the coronet glow, he looked back and whined. She followed. After an hour of pacing behind him, they crossed that border of absolute black into the diluted gray of the shadow plains. She could see the mists clinging to the deserted town just ahead.

The thought of someone seeing her with a Slyn was so ridiculous that she laughed. She'd look like the evil sorceress from the most frightening fairy tales she'd ever heard. Then the reality of it sank in. If she took Cuddles to Risson, people would run terrified from the market. No one would want to deal with her. Not only that, but he might attack. She had an alliance of sorts with him, but that didn't mean he wouldn't hurt someone else.

She placed a hand on Cuddles's head. He bristled a bit, but he stopped. "Wait for me here. I'll be back soon, and I'll bring meat for you when I return. In thanks for helping me."

He sat and snorted in the most unterrifying way possible. When she looked back from the gloaming gray, he was still sitting there, watching her.

Elia's second trip to Risson only took an hour with the enchanted bicycle. She'd tied crates she'd found at the townhouse on the front and back. Not knowing what she'd face when she left Isalindra or how long she'd be gone, Elia had brought a small fortune of Trys's gold with her. It provided more than enough for her to stock up on supplies to last awhile.

The more she bought, the more popular she became among the stalls. Why not get a few little indulgences while she was here? She hadn't expected to find them so close to the battlefield, and anything that could make the darkness feel just a little more hospitable would be welcome. So she bought a bag of chocolate-dipped almonds. A small box of hard licorice drops. In the darkness, no one would notice if her tongue turned black. Spiced mead for the cold nights. An assortment of floral soaps and lotions. And at the last stall, she bought a supply of twelve-hour logs. They would help keep the house warm and well lit while she slept, and they'd help her track the time.

As the day waned, unfriendly eyes watched from the shade of narrow alleys, and people eyed her crates full of goods with envy. Maybe she should have asked Claralily for a weapon. But that wouldn't serve her on

the battlefield. Not with Trys patrolling. It was time to go before she became a target.

The moon was already rising when she returned to the empty townhouse in Lagia. Elia stripped everything from the pantries and closets that looked remotely helpful. Not just food either, but candles, books, and medical supplies. In the master bedroom, she found some musty clothes that looked like they'd fit Trys. Well. They'd have fit Trys *before*.

She secured her overflowing crates to the seat of the bicycle and walked it slowly back to the shadowed plain. Even at night, the line of demarcation was obvious. Before the border, crickets chirped, toads sang, and night birds warbled. The gentle light of the moon washed the grass in silver, and stars twinkled overhead. As she passed into the battlefield, the moon and stars vanished, and no sounds of life permeated the border. It was like entering a crypt.

Cuddles met her just inside the battlefield. He sniffed everything she had with curiosity.

"Can you take me back to the house?" She didn't have anything that smelled like the house, but he seemed to understand. He ran a few paces ahead and looked back, waiting for her to follow. Maybe Slyns *could* understand human speech.

Later, after Elia had unloaded everything from the crates and given Cuddles the steak she'd bought him, she settled in for her first night in the house made of darkness. As she drifted to sleep, she prayed to Runa and the gods of shadow and night to protect her in this terrifying place.

The next day, Elia set out to find Trys and try to talk to him. After all, she'd made an almost-ally of Solbane, and she had a new guardian of sorts in Cuddles. If those monsters could be reasoned with, perhaps Trys could too. When she stepped out of the house, however, Cuddles was gone. Perhaps he'd gone hunting. Solbane lingered nearby.

Before she could ask what he wanted, he said, "Your kind will die by the hundreds if you don't help right now."

Elia flinched. What kind of greeting was that? "What?"

He slithered closer to her. "Humans are gathering on the western edge of the plain and on the eastern mountain border. They have mages and weapons, and they intend to continue the war. You must warn them about the Servant of the Scroll."

“I— What? What am I supposed to tell them? Why do you think they’ll listen to me?”

“You are one of them. Tell them they’ll die if they cross the shadow border craving war.” He slanted down, his beady eyes assessing her. “Or let them die. The servant will ensure that there is no war here.”

He backed away from her. If a battle was about to break out, then the king must have decided not to give her the time he’d offered in their meeting. Perhaps he thought he had a way to get rid of the monster his nephew had become. Perhaps his generals had advised against slowing their momentum in the war. Perhaps Elantika was attacking, and he had to strike back. Solbane looked at her expectantly. This was preposterous. How was she supposed to stop a battle? Images from her first trip onto the battlefield flooded her memory. Torsos and limbs. Heads and swords. Blood everywhere. If there was a chance to avoid that kind of carnage again, shouldn’t she take it?

“Wait.” She stepped toward Solbane. “I don’t know where Cuddles went, and I can’t find my way off this battlefield without him.”

Solbane blinked all three of his bulbous crimson eyes and flicked his antennae in curiosity. “Cuddles?”

“The Slyn.”

“I am no historian, but I believe it’s safe to say that no one has ever named a Slyn Cuddles before.”

Heat flared in her cheeks. “Well, I had to call him something.” She shrugged. “In this darkness, I can only see as far as my coronet glows. I need him to guide me.”

Solbane shook his head. “You’ll be too late. The servant will act soon.” Several of his arms crossed over his torso. “However, I can take you by my people’s roads. If you aren’t afraid of earth and stone.”

Elia tried to reason through the fear. The threat of Trys’s retribution would keep Solbane from hurting her. Besides, he wanted to dream her dreams. He had a reason to keep her alive. He would not let her be swallowed up in some dark cavern.

“Take me. The ones in the west are my people. Perhaps they’ll listen.” This was easily the most farfetched thing she’d ever done. Why would an army full of grown men heed the words of a random Conjurista who showed up from nowhere? But on the slim chance that they might listen, and for the sake of her conscience, she had to try.

Solbane held out an arm, and she took it. His scales were smooth and surprisingly warm, and he was careful not to let his razor-sharp claws touch her skin. These were the appendages that shaped darkness. That shunned sunlight and living things. Strange that they felt so gentle. He hovered another arm over the ground, and a perfectly round tunnel appeared, leading straight down. “Don’t let go.”

The path was warm and humid, and it smelled like dirt and rotting plants. Solbane moved silently through the dark, gripping her hand. Eventually, the path sloped up. Finally, he stopped and swiveled his head to her.

“You and I have an agreement. But the humans above us are violent and hostile. I have no interest in speaking with them. You’ll go to them alone. Their leader’s tent is just above us. When you’re ready to leave, speak my name into the dirt and I’ll open the path.”

Of course the general and his officers didn’t listen. They lectured her. This was no place for some naive pacifist girl, they told her, and she should go back to whatever town she’d crept out of. It didn’t matter that she told them what was on the battlefield ahead, that initiating violence meant sure death for them, that they stood no chance if they didn’t leave. They had their orders, and they were confident their witches and mages would protect them. They didn’t fear the wall of darkness that portended their death. When they shooed her out of the camp and threatened her, she finally called Solbane.

He was unsurprised by her lack of success. “At least you tried. Care to warn the other humans? It takes two sides to battle, after all.”

She did not want to. The day was wearing on, and she was tired. They would see her as an enemy. But it would be immoral not to try. “Yes, let’s try again.”

The same thing happened. Though she spoke to them in the common tongue, they heard her Valdan accent and accused her of spying. They claimed she was trying to trick them. When it was clear she was about to become a prisoner of war, Elia called Solbane.

“Please take me to Trys.” Her whole body ached from walking and arguing and running from angry soldiers.

Solbane guided her through another dark tunnel. “Who?”

“The Servant of the Scroll. His name is Trys.”

They emerged in a clearing in the plain. The grass was shorter, and there was no carnage in sight. She saw less of it every day that had passed without a battle, and she shivered as she imagined the creatures that . . . disposed of it. But there would surely be more if she failed today.

Solbane frowned. Or it seemed like a frown. His strange features were hard to read in the dim light of her coronet. “I am not quick enough to save you if he strikes. And I would hate to lose your dreams. Such curious things you’ve seen, Elia Tallis.”

“He won’t hurt me. I’m not here to fight. But I have to try to convince him not to slaughter everyone else.”

“I fear all your efforts will be in vain. But if you wish to try, walk three hundred paces that way. I don’t make a habit of approaching him, so I’ll wait for you here.”

Elia headed in the direction that Solbane pointed, counting each step. Finally the coronet glow showed where Trys stood, tail poised to strike, his head lashing back and forth as though listening to conversations far away. He turned to her, his skin still flaring crimson and silver. Curls and wisps of shadow flowed from his nostrils and mouth, joining the ever-expanding plain of darkness. It was like watching a river of night roll out of him, only broken by the occasional flick of his gray forked tongue.

Elia balled her hands into fists to hide their trembling. This was it. The moment she’d find out if he still knew her. She hadn’t been able to get this close to him yet. But now, he watched her, poised like a viper about to strike, and waited for her to reach him.

“Trys?” She stepped toward him, but he moved back, just within the halo of her coronet, one step away from the void-black field around them.

His serrated red pincers extended and opened on either side of her. Elia’s heart clenched in fear and sadness. His face had been so warm and full of life, and now she barely recognized him. His eerie onyx eyes considered her without any sign of recognition.

“I’m here to ask, to beg if necessary, that you not kill the soldiers on either side of the plains. Even if they march to war, let them die soldiers’ deaths. Or survive if they can. You don’t need to take part in it. You don’t need to . . . do what you did before.”

Nothing. Just a blank stare. He didn’t even attempt to speak. Gods help her, she moved closer. Did she dare touch him? She reached out her hand, but he jerked back, raising a pincer.

“I swear I won’t hurt you. I’m here in the name of peace.”

His whole body jerked at that word. *Peace.* His head swiveled side to side, and his tail flung wildly back and forth. The glowing scarlet-and-silver cursescript crawling like insects all over his body skittered faster across his skin. His six scorpion legs kicked and stomped, causing the ground to vibrate. Was Trys—*her* Trys—in there fighting the curse of the scroll?

Before she could say anything else, he stepped back and vanished into the dark. A moment later, Solbane slithered up beside her. “You should probably go lock yourself in the house. The soldiers on both sides are advancing, and you don’t want to get caught between them. Allow me to escort you.” He offered an arm, and once more, she took it and followed him into the ground.

She had failed. The armies were on the brink of a massacre, but they refused to believe her. And Trys wouldn’t even let her near him. How could she possibly help him?

When the tunnel opened in front of her house, Solbane inclined his antennae to her. “A valiant effort today, Elia.”

“A wasted effort, you mean.” Her heart couldn’t sink any lower. Maybe this whole endeavor was pointless. Myron would be doomed to live as a Deathfate forever because she couldn’t get a terrifying monster to listen to her.

Solbane hummed thoughtfully. “Only a fool tries once and gives up the goal. Perhaps you’ll make a difference yet.”

“Thank you for helping me, Solbane.” Elia stepped toward the door.

“It would have benefited us both for them to leave. Even dead humans stink of sunlight. I can’t tolerate so many of you near my home. I’m sorry they wouldn’t listen. In any case, stay in your house tonight, no matter what you hear. I think your Slyn will guard you. It’s getting late. Rest well, Elia. And send me good dreams.” Solbane faded into the dark.

Cuddles sat quietly by her threshold. He had obviously just returned from a hunt; his whole muzzle was matted with blood. Elia shivered. She didn’t want to know who or what he had eaten for dinner.

Elia laid a hand on his head. “Will you stay here tonight, and keep me safe, friend?”

Cuddles said nothing, of course, but gave a soft, contented sigh as she scratched behind his pointed ears. It was so incongruous with his menacing appearance that she laughed a little. Then she stepped inside the house,

closed the door, and brewed a pot of tea to calm her before whatever terrors this night would bring.

OceanofPDF.com

28

The tea did *not* work. At the first screams and rumbles of exploding magic a few hours later, Elia launched out of her chair, heart in her throat, and flung open the door. Cuddles was stretched across her threshold, head resting on his enormous taloned paws. He glanced up at her with anticipation. Did he think she wanted to wander into a battle? Not when she knew who was out there with the soldiers and mages.

Amber light pooled at her feet, but an arm's length past the door, the darkness swallowed it. Every few seconds a bright flash in the distance would launch into the sky, only to be consumed by the same living night that drank up the light from her house.

Inhuman snarls and howls joined the soldiers' screams. Perhaps the armies had brought enchanted creatures to fight with them. Trys would be forced to kill them too, despite their lack of choice in participating in the battle. She should have tried harder to stop the armies. All those lives were ending in terror and pain because of the greed of two kings. Control of the gold mines in the mountain range wasn't worth a single life, let alone the numbers the war had claimed so far.

Elia could barely breathe. She hadn't been able to prevent this. Hadn't been able to thwart Trys. He was out there, decimating both sides at the will of the scroll. Was he aware of what he was doing? What was this savagery doing to her good-natured scholar prince? If she managed to save him, would he still be his sweet, gentle self? He had been so nervous on the descent beneath the Serraturan library, so afraid of normal night creatures. Underneath the monster skin, was he terrified of all the predators sharing his field? If she could somehow help him return to human form, she'd never let him face another night alone.

A light nudge at her hip pulled her out of her thoughts. Cuddles prodded her back inside the house and lay down across her threshold. Elia closed the door and collapsed into the overstuffed chair. Every time a human scream was abruptly stifled, her gut wrenched.

Sleep was impossible. She watched the twelve-hour log burn down, praying to all the gods to end this nightmare. Eventually, all sounds ceased. And just like that, another field of carnage lay out there in the silent darkness.

A few days later, Elia found her thoughts drifting to Grivya. Just like the day when Baestran had first come to her shop and accepted the bribe, Elia wondered how the old witch would advise her.

What resources do you have to change your fate?

"I have this house, the enchanted bicycle, some tasteless witch bread."

What else do you have, Elia?

"I have Cuddles and Solbane." She was probably the first human ever to brave underground tunnels with a Void Shifter. And the Slyn had guarded and guided her every time she left the house. They were both worthy allies and critical to her survival here, but that wasn't enough. Elia groaned and began pacing. Ugh. She needed to take a walk.

Elia entered the darkness just outside her cottage. Cuddles stayed by her side, pressed up against her. She'd only been out for a few minutes before Solbane emerged from a perfectly round tunnel.

"Hello, curious child of sun. You should be careful where you wander. The armies are preparing for another pointless bloodbath not far from here."

A pit opened in her stomach. She couldn't imagine these generals taking her any more seriously than the last ones had. Was it even worth trying?

"Don't dwell on it," he said matter-of-factly, his body undulating in that strange, serpentine rhythm. "It sours your dreams."

"Forgive me for ruining your evening with my mortal terror."

"Apology accepted," he said with a nod, as if she'd merely stepped on his tail.

Elia steeled herself and sucked in a breath. "Do you have any ideas for how I can stop Trys from killing every soldier out there?"

Solbane blinked. "There is no stopping the Servant of the Scroll. He is performing his function."

"There must be *something*."

Solbane's antennae pulsed thoughtfully. "The only way to stop him from killing is if there are no soldiers to kill. They would need to abandon the war and go home. Then he can live here in peace and darkness until the next battlefront summons him."

Not if she broke the curse . . . somehow. But *no soldiers to kill* gave her an idea.

“I could write to my king. He was supposed to give me time to try to help Trys, but the attacks have never stopped. I don’t think he understood the scope of what is happening here. When I left, he still thought throwing enough mages and soldiers at the monster would let him eventually win. But no one stands a chance against Trys. Maybe if I explain in detail, he’ll listen and call a cease-fire.” It was a slim chance given how determined he’d been when she last talked to him. But it was worth trying.

Solbane nodded. “I hope he is as reasonable as you believe.”

As they returned to her little house made of night, he faced her, red eyes full of what looked like concern. “Do stay out of trouble tonight. If the humans resume their war, stay in your house. Let the Slyn guard you. And as always, have pleasant dreams.”

Before she could respond, Solbane opened a tunnel and left.

The next day, Elia returned to Risson and purchased a pen and a scholar’s scroll, enchanted against the elements. When she returned to the shadow plains outside Lagia, she let Cuddles guide her back to her house. She spent the rest of the day writing a letter to King Viktor Lightdragon. It took several attempts to get the wording just right, emphasizing how dire the situation was on the front while hiding his familial connection to Trys. There was no telling if the message would even reach the king or who would read it along the way, and it had seemed clear from their meeting that he didn’t want his nephew’s name associated with the monster. Elia knew that every life Trys took pushed him further from his humanity and deeper into his role as a Servant of the Scroll of Peace. She could only hope the king would listen. She rolled her letter tightly, sealed it with candle wax, and tied it with string.

That evening, Cuddles was waiting for her when she opened the door. He stood, and she scratched behind his ears. There had been another battle earlier in the day, slightly farther south. Another attempt to breach the darkness and push past Trys. Another attempt to gain control of the mines.

“Can you take me to the nearest survivor, if there is one? Surely someone fled from the fight. I need to send a message.” She waved the scroll, like that would mean anything to Cuddles.

He blinked at her and then lifted his nose in the air, sniffing. As Elia pulled the door shut, unassailable black obscured everything outside the faint glow of her coronet. Cuddles set off into the dark, stopping every few steps to wait for her. He led her to the shadow border, then crossed into a misty twilit wood. Stars pulsed overhead, and the light of the setting moon seemed as brilliant as midday sun after the void of the battlefield. Leaves rustled and twigs crunched under her boots, and Cuddles glared back at her.

"What?" she whispered. "I'm not a hunter like you. I'm trying my best. Besides, I don't want to scare whoever you found."

He gave a disgruntled snort and led her deeper into the woods. Within a few minutes, he stopped behind thick undergrowth beneath a towering oak and crouched. Elia glanced around. They had traveled parallel with the shadow border. Just twenty paces would put her back on its other side.

There, just across the creek ahead of them, a soldier sat with his back against a tree. He cradled a mangled arm to his chest and stared into the sky. Was he in shock? A broken staff lay beside him in the dirt. Cuddles licked his lips.

"Oh no you don't," Elia breathed. "That one's mine. You stay here while I go talk to him."

He bared his horrific fangs at her and pawed at the dirt. The soldier's attention snapped to them. She couldn't lose this chance.

"I promise I will bring the biggest steak I can find for you after my next trip to Risson if you leave him alone and stay here."

The soldier shuffled, searching for a weapon in the dark. There was a warning snap of pincers just inside that inky oblivion beyond the border.

"Please, please stay," Elia begged Cuddles. "A thick fatty slab of steak. Think about how much better that would taste than a salty, stringy human."

Cuddles whined and licked his lips, but he settled back into his crouch.

"Good." She scratched him behind the ears and tried not to think about what would happen if she couldn't find a steak. "Now stay."

Elia stepped out from behind the tree, hands raised. "I'm here in peace." She said it loud enough that Trys had to be able to hear her on the other side of the border. She walked to the edge of the creek. "I'm unarmed, and I have enchanted bandages and food in my satchel. I swear to the gods of night and day that I won't hurt you."

He went still and watched as she crossed the shallow creek. Mud squelched around her boots. He flinched as she drew near. Pincers snapped

again.

“I won’t hurt him,” she shouted in Trys’s general direction. And then she looked back at the soldier. “Are you going to attack me in any way?”

The whites of his eyes were huge and seemed to glow in the dark. “N-No. Please, miss. You should run. Whatever’s out there. It’s not human. I think it’s a demon.”

Elia knelt beside him, and her lips curved into a sad smile. “Something like that.”

Up close, she was struck by how young the soldier was. He couldn’t be older than Isak. Had he volunteered for this, or had his family been unable to pay the war tax to exempt him? He shivered and groaned. The wounds on his arm looked excruciating. She opened her satchel and retrieved the antiseptic and enchanted bandages she’d found in the abandoned townhouse. When the boy held out his arm, she almost fainted. Elia had never seen exposed muscle tissue before. If only Saya were here. She wouldn’t flinch.

“I’m so sorry this happened to you.” She cut away his sleeve with the sewing scissors she used for mending her clothes. Then she poured antiseptic on a clean cloth.

He inhaled through his teeth as she dabbed his arm. “There’s no one left of my company. The mage lights were supposed to light up the whole field, but the darkness swallowed them so quickly I barely had time to see the monster before my comrades started dying. It looked like a giant scorpion, but it can fly. And black vapors were coming out of its mouth, consuming everything. I was the general’s squire and one of the last soldiers onto the field. By the time we charged, there was nothing left of the others. Just pieces.” He shuddered. Elia wrapped the bandages tight around the wounds. “Never seen anything like it.”

He put his free hand over his eyes and sobbed. Tear tracks coursed through the dirt on his face. “Gods forgive my cowardice, but I ran back for the camp. The monster got my arm, and I dropped all the weapons I had. I don’t know why he let me get away. But I think he’s just over there. Waiting.”

Elia tied off the last bandage and pocketed her sewing scissors. She glanced across the border. Not that she’d be able to see Trys. “He let you live because you’d given up the fight. He only cared about ending the battle.” She turned her attention back to the weeping soldier. “Your so-

called cowardice saved your life, and now you can save hundreds more. Maybe even thousands."

He looked up at her, still sniffling. "What do you mean?"

"I'm sending you back to Isalindra with a letter for King Viktor Lightdragon. It explains the situation here and asks him not to send more soldiers. If he listens, maybe this pointless war will end. This satchel has food, a canteen of fresh water, more bandages for when you need to change them, some gold, and a letter for the king."

He shook his head. "Are you joking? The king will never grant an audience with a squire. And even if he does, he will never stop this war because of a letter from . . . who are you?"

She gripped his good hand. "Just tell him that Elia Tallis sent you. Tell him how I found you. He'll see you, I promise."

He looked at her dubiously. "He's aware of what happens here. The commanders send daily reports to Isalindra."

"I don't think he would continue these futile battles if he had details. If he knew more about the monster."

The soldier sighed, seeming to accept that nothing he said would change her mind. "Don't get your hopes up, Miss Tallis."

She slid the satchel to him and made uncompromising eye contact with him. "Even so. Will you take my letter to the king, soldier?"

He gulped, probably assuming she was some kind of witch. Good. No one except complete idiots broke a promise to a witch. "Yes. I'll do it. It will take some time, though. We're about a day north of Risson, I figure. I should be able to make it back to Isalindra within a few weeks of walking."

That was too long. "There's enough money in the satchel to buy a horse and replenish your supplies in Risson. Do that. Swear to me that you'll make all haste to go straight to the king."

He nodded. "I swear."

She stood and dusted off her knees. "When you get to Risson, don't bother asking the local witch coven for anything. You can't afford to pay their strange fees. Also, don't do business there late in the day. Watch out for the street gangs." Perhaps she was being a bit of a mother hen, but when she looked at him, it was hard not to see Isak looking back with shadows in his eyes and a bandaged arm. She softened her voice. "Be careful, soldier."

She waded across the creek and returned to Cuddles. He nudged her impatiently. "Stay a moment," she whispered.

They watched for several minutes as the soldier searched through the satchel. After what seemed an age, he stood a bit uncertainly. He gathered the satchel and his staff, then limped south. Good. With his help, maybe the king would finally see sense.

When she crossed the shadow border with Cuddles, Trys was waiting. Elia held her breath, unsure of what he'd do next. Cuddles lowered his head and growled, his fur bristling as he stepped forward. What was he thinking? Trys would shred him if he attacked. And she needed Cuddles to take her back to the house.

She put a hand on Cuddles's back. "Shh. Stop."

Trys snapped a pincer in the air.

Her eyes met his, and her throat hardened in a burning lump. His face seemed even less human now than before the battle. She cleared her throat and tried her best to sound authoritative.

"You stop too. We aren't here to fight anyone. He's just taking me back to my house."

He tilted his head and stared at her with a cold look that *her* Trys would have never given. Thrashing his tail, he retreated deeper into the dark, beyond the glow of her coronet.

OceanofPDF.com

29

Day after day for about a week, the armies renewed their fighting. There was no way the letter had reached the king yet. Even so, as she listened to the screams from the battlefield, Elia prayed that the conflict would stop.

The battlefield was enormous, spanning miles and miles of the plains between Lagia and the contested pass. But based on the proximity of the fighting, Elia guessed she'd wandered toward the pass when she'd had Solbane build her house.

Every day, Elia paced the dark fields, searching for Trys. She hoped that maybe just talking to him, telling him stories from the living world, would help. But he'd begun to avoid her. On the rare times she found him, he ran from her, sapping a little more of her hope away. Maybe this was pointless.

One frigid evening, Solbane met her in the ever-hungry dark outside her house. He asked about the places, people, and items from her dreams. She offered him tea, but he hated it and spat it on the ground.

"Why would you do this to leaves?" he demanded.

"Because it's delicious," she shot back. "I didn't even sweeten yours or add cream." Not that she had cream anymore. She had to wait for another trip to Risson for that.

"Do I even want to know what *cream* is?" No. He probably wouldn't appreciate dairy products. He studied her for several moments, head slanted at that inhuman angle. "What keeps you here, child of the sun? The battles of your kind show no sign of stopping. Your monster avoids you. Why do you linger here?"

"I need that monster's blood to perform the ritual to save my brother. But I haven't been able to get close to him. I don't want to push him and end up on the wrong end of those pincers. Besides, since his skin is impenetrable, I can't get his blood unless he turns human again. And I haven't figured out how to help him transform yet."

Solbane sniffed the air. "This rite requires blood and bits from other humans as well?"

Elia couldn’t help the little laugh that escaped her. “Yes, I suppose you could put it that way. It’s a bit gruesome, but I would do anything to free my brother.”

Solbane stared at Elia’s arm with a thoughtful gaze. “I’ve often wondered why you carry pieces of six others on your person. I thought it was a morbid human custom. I’m relieved to know it serves a greater purpose. What else do you need?”

“Just my own unlocking magic.” But something Solbane had said snagged in her mind. “Six? No, I only have a piece of five people. My siblings and my father.”

Solbane bent his inhuman face closer to hers and sniffed again. This close, his eyes and scales had an iridescent sheen. It was beautiful and unsettling.

“But there is a sixth around your neck.” He tilted his head, antennae twitching. “Perhaps it is unrelated?”

His words hit her like slaps to the face. How could she have forgotten?

“The oathstone,” she whispered, hand over her chest, where the pendant lay warm against her skin. When she and Trys had formalized their agreement, they had exchanged oathstones. Each had absorbed a bit of the other’s blood. “But when he gave me this blood, he wasn’t the harbinger of Morthanos yet. He hadn’t read the Scroll of Peace.”

Solbane straightened, several of his arms twitching in a way Elia had come to interpret as his thinking pose. “Magic and time have a strange relationship. The scroll is bound to the man, body and blood, now. The magic of the rite will recognize the blood of the harbinger even in its purer state, I would think.”

“If I’m wrong, I’ll die along with Myron and Trys.”

“The risk of attempting the rite has not changed. You are correct.”

Elia clutched the oathstone pendant in her hand. She hoped it would be enough, that it wouldn’t matter that it wasn’t in liquid form. Rinna-Grivya had said the smallest amount would work. If Elia destroyed her own oathstone with her blood on it, the price would be steep. She’d begin losing blood and not stop until a new oathstone was formed. But destroying Trys’s oathstone was effectively releasing him from the vow. Since she hadn’t fulfilled her contract agreement to bring him home safely, destroying the stone wouldn’t affect him. With no other way to get his blood, this was her only shot.

Her throat caught. It might cost her everything, but she had to try it. And she never would have realized the possibility without Solbane. A rush of affection for the unsightly monster had her throwing her arms around him before she could stop herself.

His many arms went rigid. “What is this, Elia? Are you attacking me? Should I defend myself?”

Solbane’s tail wrapped around her legs and clenched gently, and his long antennae patted her shoulders. Somewhere outside the coronet glow, pincers snapped. Elia laughed and pulled back, tears in her eyes.

“You are emitting water,” Solbane said with concern. “Please explain. I am confused.”

Elia wiped her eyes and patted Solbane’s tail. He relaxed his grip. “I’m crying because I’m so relieved. I can try to free my brother. I had Trys’s blood all along, but I’d forgotten somehow. Thank you for reminding me.”

Solbane did not look convinced that her antics were over, but he gently released himself from her hold and slithered back. “So, you’ll undertake the rite soon?”

There was no reason to let Myron suffer another second. “I’ll do it right now.”

Solbane backed out of her sight. “I will watch from a short distance away.”

Elia nodded and knelt on the ground, breathing deeply to concentrate. She needed a complete grasp of her power.

In the first days after her magic had awakened, Mama taught her the basics. One lesson in particular had stayed with Elia long after the instruction stopped. She had repeated the words to herself often in Serratura back in the days when she pushed to find the limits of her capabilities. After the plague, she’d tucked them away for fear of causing another catastrophe. But now, Mama’s voice drifted through her memory, the words of the old lesson clearer now than ever.

Magic is an ancient forest, ever renewing, ever dying. You are a little sapling, just a shoot in the woods. But your roots connect to that primordial force. As you grow, your roots will reach deeper and deeper until you achieve your full potential. Focus on the depths of those roots more than the heights of your reach, for that is the source of your power.

Elia imagined herself as a great oak tree and delved deep into her consciousness for the ends of her roots, the furthest extent of her power. She

lost her grip on time, her surroundings, whether Cuddles and Solbane and even Trys were anywhere nearby. It was only her and the magic thrumming through her veins.

She exhaled and shifted her focus to the rite as she stood and traced a circle in the ground with the toe of her boot. Elia sliced her hand on the small utility knife she kept in her belt. The cut burned and throbbed as her blood welled. She let it drip along the circle's perimeter before binding the wound. Here, on this field where the harbinger of Morthanos's power reigned, where death and darkness consumed all else, Elia would reclaim a life from the grip of a god. Her hands quivered as she opened a cartridge on her silver memory bracelet and withdrew Myron's baby tooth from its compartment. She placed it on the blood circle and moved counterclockwise to the next compass point. Her heart thudded a wild beat. Thank goodness the night was still and windless, and everything would stay put. She placed the oathstone pendant on the circle. It was a visible reminder of her invisible vow with Trys. The promise she'd broken by not bringing him home safely. Her throat tightened. He'd been so full of hope when he gave her the oathstone.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Elia placed her wounded palm on the circle. She drew from the roots of her power as she began to sing the incantation she'd memorized from the grimoire. It was not in a language she'd ever heard before, and the scholar sheets had not translated it. Grivya had said it was probably the language of the dead, considering the scroll channeled Morthanos's power. Grivya made an educated guess for the pronunciation of each word, and Elia tugged at the memory now as she sang.

After the first verse, the ground under her hand began to vibrate. After the second verse, the ring of blood shone bright gold. During the third verse, the circle ignited in green, heatless flames. In the fourth verse, she sang Myron's whole name. In the fifth verse, she named Trys as the harbinger. In the final verse, she threaded her own unlocking power into the spell. She poured all of herself into the magic, unbinding the godstouch from Myron. The oathstone shattered, and somewhere in the distance, an unholy scream echoed through the unnatural quiet. Trys. Elia shoved down every drop of her concern for him and concentrated on the incantation. She had to follow the rite perfectly.

The blood ring heated to an unbearable temperature, but Elia did not remove her hand. Her veins pulsed under her skin. She pressed her hand harder into the ground. Even if her skin sloughed off her bones, she *would* complete this rite. Sweat dripped down her arms, and searing spasms shot up her spine in waves.

The green flames rose high into the sky, a blindingly bright beacon, and for once, the cursed darkness could not or would not swallow it. Elia's mouth was dry from the endless song of the incantation, but she half screamed, half sobbed the last words into the circle. Thunder boomed, and the ground rumbled beneath her. Then the flames disappeared. The blood ring vanished, along with Myron's tooth and the broken oathstone pendant. Elia gasped, shaking hand still on the ground, body shudder-racked and weak. But still, she did not—*would* not—lift her hand.

Finally, the blood ring dimmed to dark gold, then ember orange, and then it went dark. The ground stopped vibrating and went cold under her hand. Only then did she dare to move. She winced as she glanced at her damaged left hand. The skin was a mottled mess of angry red and pale white flesh. The fingers were so swollen she couldn't tell where her knuckles were. And the pain, oh Runa have mercy, the pain. Every nerve in her hand was still on fire in the aftermath of the ritual.

Elia whimpered and sobbed, cradling her left hand to her body. Her sweat-soaked clothes clung to her, and chills raced over her skin. The taste of ashes and blood coated her mouth, and her cheeks were tight with the salt of dried tears. She needed to get inside and collapse in front of the warm hearth.

She tried to stand, but her legs were liquid. She was drained from the use of so much magic. But the rite had worked. She *knew* it in her bones. She would not be alive if she had failed.

Myron was safe from the grip of Morthanos. He could live a normal life now. She had finally, finally righted one of her many wrongs.

In the impending haze that threatened to steal her consciousness, she could almost hear Rinna-Grivya's chiding about the depths of Elia's potential. If she could unbind a godstouch, what else might she be capable of? But the question eddied away in a current of weariness and agony.

Cuddles nudged her side. Solbane approached carefully. His antennae waved gently as he reached several arms toward her.

"I'll help you to your door," he said quietly.

Once inside, she half hobbled, half crawled to her bed. She let herself fall into the pile of blankets and pillows, and a deep sleep settled over her.

OceanofPDF.com

30

Days went by in silence, weariness, and unending pain in her left hand. She was utterly drained. Elia woke, ate a bit of tasteless vitapane, and went back to sleep without leaving the cottage. She'd had to break into the stash of healing sanadew potion she'd bought on a supply run. It took three bottles for Elia's magic reserves to replenish. Solbane knocked on her door once every few days to make sure she was still alive. Her nights had been dreamless for him too, he'd said.

Less than half of the time in her oath to Grivya remained. Now that Myron was safe, she could focus all her attention on helping Trys. She'd broken a godstouch, after all. What was a cursed scroll in comparison? But for the life of her, she had no idea what to do. At the end of the agreed time, the blood oath would force her to choose between abandoning Trys again or losing her own life. Either option was unacceptable. Deep in her bones, she knew she must be able to do something to save him. So she stayed on the field, looking for her moment and fighting the frustration of each new day with no solution.

One chilly afternoon, Elia returned from a trip to Risson. It was the first time she'd been strong enough to leave the house in days. She had stocked up on food, twelve-hour logs, candles, tea, balm for her injured hand, and even some of the season's best cider, according to the local merchants. As she pushed the laden bicycle across the plain, Cuddles trotted ahead of her, guiding her back to the cabin. He was probably excited about the enormous raw steak in her crate. She imagined mulling a little pot of cider with cinnamon sticks. But before she'd allow herself to indulge in something like that, she had a monster to find.

As she had from the beginning of this adventure, Elia had been turning over every possibility of a plan to help Trys. Every last one of them hinged on knowing if Trys—*her* Trys—was still inside the monster. Because if he was well and truly gone, she was wasting precious time. There was only one way to find out for sure. She had to confront him.

After she put her supplies away, she wrapped her hand, filled a pack with necessities, and set out. Cuddles sauntered beside her, maw dripping with blood from the steak. She hadn't seen Trys since she'd completed the rite. So she followed the only path where she was sure to find him: toward the carnage. Elia didn't even need Cuddles's guidance. The scent of decay and blood was enough to lead her. Her boots squelched in gods only knew what, and she constantly had to repress the impulse to gag. After a few hours, she reached the shadow border, and finally sighted the dim glow of battle camps just beyond it. Trys had to be around here somewhere.

Turning back into the dark, Elia stumbled over abandoned weapons and bodies. Maybe these soldiers would be laughing over a campfire with their comrades right now if Trys hadn't ever read the scroll. If Elia had already found a way to save him. Maybe they would be home with family and friends, with sweethearts and lovers. The gory truth grew more vivid and inescapable with every step. Greed and war were a blight on not just the human world but the human soul. No wonder Morthanos hated the encroachment on his authority over death. War stole these soldiers' right to a peaceful death surrounded by loved ones and mourners. There would be no passage carts for them. No gentle journey through the gate. No offering in their name. Their souls would wander, restless, until Morthanos called them to the nearest temple's gate to his realm.

At first, Elia was so lost in her thoughts that she didn't notice the hulking form at the edge of her coronet glow. It wasn't until Cuddles let out a low growl that Elia snapped to attention.

"Trys?" she called. His head whipped to her as she called to him. "Trys!" She stumbled over the uneven few steps between them.

He jerked back, tail whipping. When her coronet's glow revealed his full silhouette, Elia's pulse quickened. Maybe this was her chance.

"Trys, please stay. I want to talk to you. Don't go."

As Trys watched her, Cuddles launched in front of her. That darling, overprotective idiot. When was he going to learn that he was no match for this monster?

"Calm down, Cuddles." She put her undamaged hand on the Slyn's back, and he stepped to her side but didn't relax.

Trys tensed, enormous tail darting forward. The gentle moonglow of her coronet was faint, and she momentarily closed her eyes to adjust her vision. Her hair moved in a puff of air. She opened her eyes, and he was mere feet

from her. His ink-black eyes probed her impassively. His wings dropped to his sides.

“Hello, Trys,” she said softly. He only looked blankly at her. Had he forgotten his name? Rather than acknowledge that sad possibility, she pushed ahead. “I’ve missed you.” Nothing. No change in his stance or cold facial expression. “I’ve stayed in a house on this field so I could be close to you.”

At this, he frowned and tilted his head at an eerie angle. Clearly, he did not approve of the house’s intrusion. Or maybe he didn’t approve of her staying in it.

“But I can’t stay much longer. I have a little bit of time left before a blood oath will require me to leave, and I want to help you.” He *needed* to understand this. “To bring you back home if I can.”

Trys blinked.

“Do you understand me?” She didn’t break eye contact with him, and though he tensed, he didn’t move. “You are Trystoferian Alexios Magnus Felipe Lightdragon, Ninth Prince of Isalindra, Duke of Valdan, Lord of Umbreck Estate. My friend.” But Trys was more than that, wasn’t he? She wasn’t pouring herself out for a mere acquaintance. If she was successful here, she was going to spend her life with him, as his wife. Elia swallowed and took a step toward him. “My betrothed.” She held that vacant onyx gaze. “My family.”

Though his face remained impassive, he shifted his weight from side to side and chuffed a bit. He *had* to be aware of what she was saying. Underneath the monster, *her* Trys was still there.

Elia set her jaw. “Yes. That’s right. We’re family, and I am *not* leaving you. Not if I can help you.”

She was close enough to see the glowing scarlet-and-silver curse inked into his skin. The cursemarks weren’t still. Every character was in motion, scrambling in a frenzy over every inch of him. Did it hurt? Did it poison his mind? What could a simple Conjurista do against a curse bound so tightly?

Elia gasped.

A curse *bound* so tightly.

The curse was bound.

Locked into his skin.

And she was no simple Conjurista. She was the only Conjurista able to open the door to a floating sky island. She had unleashed a memory plague

bound by the most skilled magicians in the world. She had opened the impossible vault that caged this monster. She had broken a godstouch.

That deep place where her magic was rooted sang to her. Her blood heated with magic aching to be released. What if her potential, her roots, went deeper than this curse? She met Trys's eyes and poured all her rising warmth and confidence into her face. He did not flinch away. This could work.

Elia reached out her right hand and placed a finger on his chest. Trys didn't back away. His skin was smooth and hard, almost like a carapace. The curse avoided her touch. When she lifted her finger, she could see his actual skin. Not the shell of the monster. Not the curse-script.

He gazed down at her with that same blank look. There was only one way to form a key for an arcane magical lock. She grimaced. This was not going to be pleasant.

He was so terrifying. What if he misunderstood her intentions? Her heart hammered. Maybe if she explained, he'd allow her to try.

"Trys, I'm going to try to unlock the curse that's holding you. I have to do what I did in the library and the scholar's hall."

His expression didn't change, but he leaned toward her. She inhaled sharply. This could go fatally wrong very quickly. Praying to Runa for every drop of luck she could spare, Elia rose up on her toes, pulled Trys's face down with a surprising lack of resistance, and pressed his lips to hers. Cold. His mouth was so cold. It felt nothing like the kiss in the Great Library of Serratura. There was no spark of romance, no heat between them.

But this was no kiss. This wasn't just Trys's mouth. It was the lock of the curse.

Elia pushed her tongue past a row of dagger-sharp teeth, and he slowly opened his mouth wider. Thank the gods he wasn't trying to bite her or push her away. She poured her magic into him, just as she had done to the cursed vault that housed the scroll. Elia reached for the roots of her power, summoned the entire well of her magic, and emptied it into him. She hummed the incantation to summon a key into his terrifying mouth. She prayed and hoped for it to work.

As before, Elia's strength left with her magic. But she held on, locking her tongue with his forked one. She might not get another opportunity, so this one had to count. *Work*, she begged her magic. *Win.* He didn't fight her

or reciprocate, but his lips turned icy, like metal in winter. His mouth tasted of salt and iron and gods only knew what else. But still, she held on. Under her fingers on his neck, the curse burned against her fingertips, resisting the onslaught of her magic. She would *not* let it keep him. Tears slid down her cheeks as she held on despite the burning that spread from her mouth to the rest of her body as the curse fought her.

Some ancient sorcerer with unfathomable skill had knit the spell together, and it would not release just because the magic of a young Conjurista told it to. And yet, every sorcerer had a match. They weren't gods. She continued the incantation and tried to ignore the flick of his forked tongue against her teeth.

As the incantation continued, Elia's body grew heavy, and her arms trembled. Stabbing pain sliced through every vein. The spell was taking too much, draining her of every drop of magic. It couldn't end like this, not when she was so close. She begged the gods to lend her aid, to banish the cursed beast, and to bring Trys back to her. But even as she prayed and sang, her magic was torn away. Her body, her very soul, quaked with the sudden loss of so much of her power. Even the vault for the Scroll of Peace had not taken this much.

Elia repeated the incantation twice, voice rasping and limbs shaking, before the key took shape in her mouth. It was not metal, wood, stone, or gem, but liquid fire. Tangy and acidic. It pooled under her tongue, coated both their lips, and dripped down her chin. A moment later her mouth filled beyond her capacity, and she let go, falling to her knees, convulsing, every inch of her in searing torment.

Elia ripped her apron off and retched onto it, catching every last burning drop she spat out. In the dim coronet glow, luminous gold puddles moved into shapes on the cotton, arranging and rearranging into lines of text. Ink. The liquid was golden ink. Its acrid taste still roiled her stomach, but she didn't dare look away, even as her vision went black at the edges and her body swayed.

Above her, Trys—no, the beast—shrieked through gold-stained lips and beat his wings against the still night. He took flight, leaving her alone and gasping in the dark. He was still that horrid beast, still cursed. But not for much longer. When the ink settled, she knew beyond doubt, beyond all odds, that this was the key to unlocking the peace curse. A golden benediction.

The ground tilted beneath Elia's knees, and she clutched her stomach. Too much. The curse had taken too much of her magic, her essence. Those deep roots had shriveled into a desiccated waste, draining her life force to its dregs. Breathing was almost impossible, and her entire body throbbed in pain. The hard earth rushed to meet her as she crumpled, and stars erupted behind her eyes. Her chest rattled, and her breath wheezed out of her. This couldn't be the end for her. She needed to go home to her siblings. She had a whole life to live with Trys. She was so close to saving him with that benediction. She couldn't die now.

"Runa," Elia rasped. "If you have ever had a drop of love for me, one of your godstouched, then hear my prayer." She coughed and choked on ink-flavored saliva. "Let me save him. Let me see my family again. And I will do anything you ask. Spare my life now, and the remainder of it is yours."

Brilliant silver light flared next to Elia, illuminating the field around her. "Hail, little mortal," a melodic voice said. "You have irritated Morthanos more than anyone has dared in the last century. Shouldn't you be asking me to smooth things over with him before you die?"

Elia's heart jumped. It took a massive effort to roll her head to the side and peer into the darkness. In the coronet glow, she could just make out the features of a very tall woman lying next to her on the ground. The woman's silver hair reflected the coronet's white light, and the crow's-feet around her eyes contracted in amusement. Though she looked nothing like her statues and icons, there was no doubting who the woman was.

"Runa?" Elia rasped.

"Yes, child," Runa said softly. "You're dying. But you knew that, didn't you? Morthanos is eagerly reaching for your soul. I can heal you. For a price."

Though every muscle in her neck was locked in knots, Elia gave the best nod she could. "Please. Anything," she whispered.

A hungry look flared in Runa's eyes. Maybe Elia should have been frightened by it, but she was barely hanging on to consciousness as it was.

"Swear yourself and your magic into my service for the rest of your life, and I'll clear your slate with Morthanos and heal your body. I know the extent of your power. If I help you, think of all we could unlock together."

It wasn't much of a choice. Live as the servant of one god in life or the captive of another in death. After everything she'd done, there was no telling what kind of horrific plans Morthanos had in store for Elia's

afterlife. And her family needed her. Trys needed her. By all the gods, Elia wanted to *live*.

Another wave of agony washed over her body, and her limbs began to shiver. She coughed, and the metallic tang of blood filled her mouth.

“You’re out of time,” Runa said, calmly extending her hand as Elia’s agony crested. “Decide now.”

Elia’s arm felt like it weighed a thousand pounds as she lifted it, but when her hand clasped Runa’s, the pain rushed out of her.

“Say it, Elia. Swear yourself to me.”

“This I swear by blood and breath,” she wheezed. “My life and magic are yours.”

Runa grinned, her mouth full of sharp white teeth. “Close your eyes, child. This will be bright.”

Even with Elia’s eyes closed, the light that erupted was blinding. Within seconds, her body felt nothing but radiant warmth. Her damaged hand throbbed like a limb reawakening.

“Welcome to the ranks of the Godsworn, mortal Elia Tallis. When I call, you will serve. When I command, you will obey. You will never have dealings, bargains, or vows with another deity or their mortal representatives. I alone will number your days, and I alone may grant you death. Take my mark on your wrist and a measure of my power as your own, but you may only use your magic with my permission.”

As Runa spoke, rapid bursts of power pulsed in time with Elia’s heart. It was as if the roots of her magic had found an endless lake. They drank and drank until she was brimming with power. Her left wrist twinged with prickling heat. Finally, the sensations ebbed, and Elia began to lose her hold on consciousness.

Before her awareness faded, she heard Runa say, “You may conclude your efforts with Morthanos’s harbinger and honor your betrothal vow to the Isalindran prince when the time comes. Use your magic to leave this place when you are ready. Afterward, await my command. I’ll see you soon, my new Godsworn mortal.”

At last, Elia could stay awake no longer, and she yielded to a deep sleep.

OceanofPDF.com

31

Elia woke sprawled across the bed in her house with a merrily crackling fire and a trail of drool dripping down her cheek. She felt oddly refreshed. Hazy memories of a goddess and unlocking the curse came back to her. Had she truly put her lips on that beast? Her left arm tingled, and she sat up to inspect it. The damage from the rite was totally gone, but her wrist bore an intricate silver tattoo of swirls and stars. Runa's Godsworn mark.

Her apron was folded neatly next to her on the bed. Glinting in the gentle fire and coronet light, golden words covered the apron completely. Elia grabbed the apron and held it closer to the light. She didn't recognize the language, but she knew what it was. Only benediction spells were gold. Benedictions broke curses, and this one would unlock Trys's.

Outside, a strange keening pierced the night, throwing a cold damper over her celebration. This wasn't over yet. Elia peeked out the door. Cuddles wasn't in his usual spot. She looked into the darkness beyond her door. And froze.

Trys stood just inside the periphery of the cottage's warm light. He was waiting for her. The golden ink on his lips flashed. His forked tongue flicked, and he opened his mouth. Even in the dim glow of the cottage light, she could make out rows of fangs. She shuddered. He let out a shrill, inhuman wail. It sounded completely unlike his monstrous battle cry. Perhaps he'd been in pain since she'd unlocked the benediction. She ached to save him, but she had no idea how to say those golden words, and a mistake could make everything worse. Elia clutched the apron to her chest and felt all her grief and worry rise to the surface.

"I have the benediction, but I don't know this language. I can't save you with this, not yet. What if the curse kills you if I get it wrong? I need to take this to someone who can teach me how to say the words. But I don't want to leave you either. What should I do?" Not that he could answer her. She scowled in frustration.

He held out his hand and looked at her. Was it the monster or Trys beckoning to her now?

“You want me to come outside?”

He extended both arms, hands cupped together. Could he be asking for the apron? It was true that Trys’s Lore-mense magic could probably help him decipher the words, but how would he speak in his current state? She left the cottage and met him on the field.

“It’s an incantation, Trys. Are you able to chant it?”

The black eyes just blinked at her, and his arms remained outstretched.

“Do you promise not to hurt the apron?” It would be a disaster if he destroyed the benediction before she had a chance to find out if it worked.

No change in his posture. Well, what had she expected? But it was their only option. If he destroyed the apron, she’d beg Runa to let her draw the spell out of him again. She’d done it once, and she’d do it a hundred times if it meant saving him. He snatched the apron when she offered it to him. He examined the cloth, unblinking.

“Can you say the words?”

Trys looked at her and pointed to the cottage. He wanted her to go inside? Was he trying to protect her? Well, he could forget that.

“No. I’m staying beside you.”

He brought the needle of his tail inches from her face. And pointed to the cottage again.

“Trystoferian Alexios Magnus Felipe Lightdragon. I’ve stayed on this battlefield made of night and carnage for you. I’ve given blood and magic for you. Traveled wilderness and thief-thick roads just to find you. I passed through an army to be here with you. I gave up my dreams to create this house made from the night itself just to stay near you. If you think that now, when we finally have a shred of hope, I’m going to hide behind my walls and listen to you suffer alone in the dark, you don’t know me at all.” Her hands were on her hips and her chest was heaving.

He withdrew his tail and looked at her for a long moment. Finally, he stepped away from her and studied the apron. He looked at her, then the apron, then back at her again. Was he—no, it couldn’t be—was he embarrassed?

She raised her brows at him. “Well? Get on with it. Give it a try. There’s no one here but me to see.”

He held the apron up and opened his mouth. The same mournful wail came out. This time, it seemed to follow a cadence and rhythm. Hope

fluttered in her heart. She whispered a prayer to the gods to hear him, and then paused. Would anyone but Runa hear her prayers now?

As Elia watched, a dim glow emanated from the benediction characters. They glimmered gold and lifted from the apron one by one. She held her breath. His cadence changed slightly, and the characters flew at his skin, the gold sinking in to join the scarlet and silver. No, not joining the curse characters. The gold benediction characters were *fighting* the curse.

Trys flinched and screamed the incantation but did not lose the rhythm. It took all of Elia's restraint not to get closer, not to hold him as he thrashed in misery.

"I'm here. I'm with you. I'm right here," she repeated over and over. It was the only comfort she could offer.

As he finished the benediction, the fight between the characters continued. Slowly, so very slowly, the gold characters took the advantage. Trys's body jerked to and fro, and he lost control of his limbs and tail.

He roared and gestured at her house, but she shook her head, unable to tear her eyes away.

Trys screamed again as the additional limbs and the pincers fell away from his body. The apron trembled in his hands. Glistening silver and crimson ink seeped from the corners of his mouth, from his nose and ears. His whole body flushed luminescent as the battle between curse and benediction approached its deciding moments. The tail and stinger fell away. His shrieks became garbled as the fangs fell from his gums and normal teeth grew back. The ink slid down his body into a pool at his feet.

Trys swayed and fell to his knees, naked and utterly human. It had worked. The benediction key had unlocked the peace curse. Thank all the gods.

His body convulsed. Elia rushed toward him, but he held up a trembling arm to stop her. Tormented brown eyes met hers in warning. Brown. Not void black. Warm, welcome, familiar brown. Trys dropped the apron in the swirling crimson-and-silver pool, and it absorbed the curse of the Scroll of Peace. Trys finally stopped singing and gulped the cold night air. Then he collapsed at her feet, gripping the apron and shivering in the glow of her coronet. He gave her a final, anguished look before losing consciousness.

Trys—*her* Trys—had finally returned.

OceanofPDF.com

32

It had been an enormous effort to haul Trys's limp body into her house, and an even greater feat pulling him into bed and dressing him in the pair of trousers she'd borrowed from the abandoned townhouse when she'd first arrived. She'd slept in the overstuffed armchair by the fire when she wasn't checking him for signs of life, forcing vitapane and water down his throat, and tending to his needs. But he was safe. He was free. She could have flown if he needed her to.

Six and a half logs later, Elia watched flickering firelight dance across Trys's still face. Magic brimmed under her skin, just waiting to be released. When she felt for the roots of her power, they went so much deeper than ever before. And that deep, unending lake of Runa's power was there too, feeding Elia's own magic. Strengthening it and expanding it into something vast and limitless. Elia closed her eyes and imagined drawing from that deep lake. Her body thrummed. And then she remembered her vow. She couldn't touch any of that immense magic without Runa's permission. One day, Elia would probably push against that barrier. But for now, she was alive and healed, free of Morthanos. And grateful. She was inexpressibly grateful to Runa. She put away any further thought of the goddess and her magic as Trys stirred.

Elia put one knee on the bed beside Trys and hovered over him, looking for any trace of the Scroll of Peace's curse. Not a shadow of it remained. Her fingers skated over his chest and arms, and he made a sound that was half moan, half something more like pleasure. Elia's breath caught and she withdrew her hands immediately.

"E-Elia?" he rasped, his eyes slowly blinking open. "What—"

"Shh." She stood and poured a glass of water from the pitcher on the nightstand.

His eyes drank in the sight of her as he gulped the water down. He wiped his mouth and tentatively handed the glass back to her. As if she were a mirage that might fade if he moved.

“It’s really you.” His gaze roamed over her face. “You’re here. How? What happened?”

Elia pulled the chair up next to the bed and took his hand in hers, relief flooding through her that her scholar prince was finally awake. “Maybe you should just rest for now,” she said, stroking her thumb over the back of his hand.

“No, please. Tell me everything. I don’t want to go back to sleep not knowing which of the nightmares are real.”

She had no idea what he remembered after the vault, so she started from the Serraturan dungeon and brought him up to the present, glossing over the meeting with his uncle, the carnage and destruction on the battlefield, and the lives he’d ended. That conversation could wait until he’d recovered further. When she got to the rite and how she’d freed Myron, Trys furrowed his brows and closed his eyes.

“So *that’s* what it was . . . my connection to the rite.” He pressed his temples and grimaced. “Something happened where I felt intense pain out of nowhere, but I didn’t know why.”

Elia continued until the present. He didn’t interrupt again, but when she told him about becoming Godsworn to Runa, he studied the mark on her wrist. With extreme tenderness, he placed his lips softly over the mark in a brief, feather-soft kiss. Then he threaded her fingers through his own. Elia kept their hands locked together as she finished the tale. When she was done speaking, he exhaled.

“Just now,” she said, “I was checking to make sure the curse is well and truly gone.”

He held up their joined hands and looked at his unblemished arm. “And do you find that it is? Gone, I mean?”

Elia ran her fingers gently up and down his arm, and goose bumps rose under her touch. She drank in the sight of him well and whole. Returned to her. Her voice was a bit more choked than she meant when she said, “As far as I can see, it is. You’re free, Trys.”

A small, tentative smile curved his lips, and he pulled her into his arms. “My Elia. You saved me.”

“I got stronger too. I can feel my magic growing, especially after becoming Godsworn. And I’ll be even more powerful the next time my magic is needed.”

He squinted at the wall and shook his head. “I wish I could have seen Runa. But it’s all a fuzzy blur. I can’t sort out what was real. I know I did bad things. Violent things.” He paused to look at her helplessly.

“It wasn’t you,” she said softly. “It was the monster. Yes, it was horrible. But it wasn’t your fault.”

His gaze had gone distant. “I remember seeing you and hearing you talk to me. I don’t know if I heard everything you said. I tried to run away because I didn’t want to hurt you. It’s all so horrible. And you—you came so close to death. I almost lost you, Elia. I am so sorry for all of this. For my hubris with the scroll and your pain.”

“Trys, stop. You couldn’t have known what would happen.”

The dark circles under his eyes and his sunken cheeks made him look haunted. And perhaps he was. Who knew what the curse had done to his mind while it had control of him? The stomach-churning evidence she’d seen on the battlefield and the fact that the area might never be habitable again were more than enough to make her glad he hadn’t been fully aware. His head drooped, and his eyes lost focus.

“You should rest now,” she said, sitting up and moving away from him. “There will be plenty of time to talk later.”

He gave her a panicked look. “Please don’t go. Hold me till I fall asleep?”

How could she say no to that? She smiled. “Of course.”

“And always?” Color rose to his cheeks, and she felt her own face heat in response. “Will you come home with me and stay at my estate?”

The uncertainty in his voice almost undid her. How could he think she’d want anything else? But this was the scholar prince everyone had abandoned. The one *she’d* abandoned in Serratura.

“I’ll always stay with you, if that’s what you want. But I understand if you want to be done with me. I’m so sorry I left you in Serratura. I didn’t fulfill my contract with you, but more important, in your hour of suffering and need, I ran away. I’ll never stop regretting that.”

His brows rose almost to his hairline. “How could you be sorry for surviving? They were going to kill you.” His eyes shone with tenderness. “You *had* to run. And, yes, emphatically *yes*, I still want you with me.”

She grinned playfully. “In that case, you might want to know that the king will still approve our marriage even though I failed the contract. And even though I don’t think he likes me very much.”

“What?” He coughed. “My uncle is terrifying and unyielding, and you asked him for my hand in marriage?”

“It turns out he is very yielding when his precious nephew is at stake. So, if you still want me, I’m all yours, Prince Smudge.” Their fingers were still entwined. She pressed a gentle kiss to his forehead and started to move back, but he caught the back of her neck in his palm and pulled her closer.

He grinned, and there it was. That dimple she’d missed so much. Her heart soared as he said, “I’ll always want you, Elia.”

She pressed her forehead to his and sifted her fingers through his hair. His breath hitched. Then his lips crashed into hers in a fierce kiss that held the promise of so much more. Of sweet moments reading together by a blazing hearth. Of silly moments keeping him safe from spiders. Teasing and banter and quieter adventures closer to home. A life together.

He released her much too soon and yawned with an apologetic smile. She needed to let him sleep. Trys glanced into the shadowy corners of the room and then at the weak embers in the hearth.

“While I sleep, will you keep the fire bright?” He hesitated before sheepishly adding, “I don’t want to be in the dark.”

She nodded even as her heart cracked a little at his words. “Of course.”

He grabbed her hand, fingers clutching hers. “One more thing. I remember . . . I thought there was a moment when you called me family.” His eyes were filled with a desperate pleading. “Was that real?”

“Yes,” she said, lifting the back of his hand to her lips. “After everything we just went through, I’m with you till the end.”

His eyes softened in an expression of wonder. “I haven’t had anyone in so long.” He reached over with his free hand and touched her hair, wrapping the golden strands around his fingers. “I didn’t think I ever would again.”

Elia’s chest burned, and it was a struggle to keep her voice steady as she said, “Well, you have me now. And Isak and Orin and Saya and Myron.” She smiled. “And possibly Grivya, but I wouldn’t dare speak for a witch.”

He gave a tentative, weary smile. “Thank you.”

She wanted to say more, but his eyes were already blinking shut. His head lolled onto her shoulder, and she carefully lowered him to the pillow. She held him until his breathing slowed to a deep, rhythmic pace. Then she put another twelve-hour log in the hearth and stoked the fire until it crackled. She curled up beside Trys, threw an arm around him, and finally allowed herself to rest.

The next time Elia woke, he was staring at her. How long had she been asleep? A quick glance at the log eased her mind. Only about six hours. She sat up straight, and her neck protested with a tight knot. She stretched her arms and massaged the spot. If only it had occurred to her to imagine a larger bed when Solbane was building the place. But she'd thought of her little bed back in the merchant quarter. The perfect size for one, but much too small for two.

Trys remained silent while she stood to stoke the fire and then reached for the little jar of salve she'd been using for her hand. The combined fragrance of lavender, yarrow, eucalyptus, rosemary, and healing magic filled the air as she massaged it into her neck. It smelled like sun and spring. She sighed as the knot loosened.

"I should have asked this earlier, but where are we?" he rasped.

She filled a glass from the water jug on the nightstand and handed it to him. "In a little magical house."

His eyebrows rose as he sipped. He swallowed and asked, "Are we still on the battlefield?"

The smallest ray of hope shone in his eyes, and she grimaced as she squashed it. "Yes."

He furrowed his brow and gripped the blanket. "I had hoped I'd wake at home. That it was all a nightmare. But if we're here, it was all true."

His voice betrayed his utter desolation. His grown-out curls fell over his eyes as he stared into the empty space between them. But she couldn't lie to him. The monster was gone, but he'd see soon enough that the darkness remained. Perhaps it always would. Perhaps that was the price of war, or the consequence of involving the Scroll of Peace. But dispelling it was not her task. Some royal sorcerer could manage that.

Elia turned to the tiny kitchen area and poured water into the kettle. He watched her bustle about, toasting a slice of vitapane, which at least gave it more texture if not flavor. She'd been so careful with the butter, but there was only a thin slab left. Elia hovered the knife over it. Trys needed all the fat and good food he could get right now. He needed to remember daytime and simple pleasures. She smeared the final bit over his slice.

Elia set two steaming cups of tea and the buttered toast on the little bistro table and turned back to Trys. "Join me for breakfast?"

He surveyed the meager offering on the table for a moment and then sat up.

“Did you borrow a shirt too?” Trys asked hopefully.

It was a shame to cover his lovely body with more clothes, but he was probably cold. And he’d been through enough without her ogling him any further. She opened a cupboard and found a soft, worn flannel shirt she had taken from the townhouse.

He slipped it on and then rocked on the edge of the bed, trying to stand. Helping him to the table was an ordeal. His transformation and days in bed had weakened his muscles. In the end, he had to put his arm around her shoulders and slowly hobble to the table.

After they ate, Elia helped him back to the bed and propped him up with pillows. Trys needed to go home to a real bed and hearty meals and a staff who would dote on him. The little vial of Papa’s blood only had enough left for one more door. Though the house made of night did technically have a door, if she wasn’t able to enchant it properly, it would waste the last of his blood. They’d be stuck with a long journey of grueling travel to make it back to Isalindra on time for her to hold up her bargain with Grivya. They needed to go to Lagia, where she could enchant a normal door.

“Making calculations about something?” Trys asked as he sipped his tea.

She grinned at him. “I’m thinking about when we can start heading home.”

Home. With Trys. She could scarcely believe it was true.

OceanofPDF.com

33

Two days later, they decided to leave. There had been no sounds or signs of battle in days. Elia wondered if the king had finally decided that the costs were not worth it. If he'd pulled his troops and ceded the pass. It seemed unlikely. She packed her few belongings and took a last look around the little sanctuary that had kept her safe during the horrors of her time here.

When Elia opened the front door, Cuddles was stretched across the threshold with his massive head resting on his paws. Trys shrieked.

"What in the love of all the gods is a Slyn doing here?" he sputtered.

Cuddles looked helplessly at Elia. Almost as if to say, "I did nothing."

Elia laughed. "It's just Cuddles."

The panic on Trys's face intensified. "Cuddles?!"

"I had to give him the least scary name possible just to get used to him."

"But why would you *want* to get used to a Slyn? They're creatures straight out of horror stories."

That was ironic coming from Morthanos's harbinger. She laughed, the first real laugh she'd had in a while, and bent down to scratch Cuddles behind the ears. "He kept me safe, helped me find you, and led me to and from the house for supplies. He's a friend. I can't believe you don't remember. He went everywhere with me."

She fetched the bicycle and secured their belongings to the crates and seat.

"I remember him being a massive murky lump with eyes and teeth. But now that I truly see him"—Trys looked down at Cuddles and shuddered—"He's absolutely terrifying."

She took Trys's hand in hers. "He's harmless. Don't worry. He's going to guide us back to Lagia."

Trys scoffed in disbelief, and he gave the Slyn a wide berth as they followed him. Cuddles guided them to the shadow border, plodding slowly ahead of them. Trys limped beside Elia, and she kept her arm around his waist for support. This miserable quest was almost over.

Her farewell conversation with Solbane played in her head. He'd promised to always be her ally. If she ever needed to bargain again, he would take her up on it.

"In the meantime," Solbane had said, "weave a life of color and wonder to fill your dreams. I want to taste and see and smell and experience *everything*. Without ever having to leave my blissful darkness, of course." His voice had been full of good humor and curiosity, and she'd promised to do just as he'd asked.

Elia glanced at Trys. Despite all the uneven mounds and divots, the remnants of armor and weapons that littered the field, he managed to stay on his feet and keep his arm on her shoulders as he hobbled beside her. His eyes watered, and as they passed into the shadow border, he blinked against the soft light of the moon. He'd probably sleep for days when he returned home, but at least he'd be in his own bed with proper food and care.

Cuddles paused at the last little hill before the shadows thinned to gray mists and then cleared completely for the world beyond. He looked up at her and tilted his head. A silent question simmered in his eyes.

Was she willing to keep a nightmare? He certainly wasn't a pet. He'd never obey her without reason. Could he live in the human world? Trys did own a partially wooded estate. He was practically sleepwalking, so Elia would have to make this decision on her own.

Elia called Cuddles over and patted his head. "If you want to come with us, we'll have to make an agreement." Elia paused, watching the Slyn. The intelligence in his eyes was uncanny. "You'll have to stay away from humans, and harm no one who isn't trying to harm us or you. You can live on Trys's lands and guard against unwelcome intruders or anyone with evil intent. In exchange, I swear you'll never be hungry or lonely or hunted again." She extended her hand. "If you understand and agree to these terms, shake."

Cuddles stared at her hand for a long moment, blinking slowly. Then he raised his right paw to his mouth. He met her eyes and bit his own paw. Black blood seeped out of the wound as he held out his paw.

Elia drew in a sharp breath. "You want to seal the agreement in blood?"

She pulled a small knife from her pack and sliced her arm just deeply enough to bleed. She let the blood trickle down her forearm and pool in her palm. When her hand met his paw, her whole arm erupted in gooseflesh, and magic coursed over her entire body. She cleaned both their wounds and

wrapped them in enchanted bandages. What would Rinna-Grivya say when Elia returned with a Slyn to whom she'd sworn a blood oath? Elia smiled at the thought of getting a scolding from the dear old witch.

When they arrived at Lagia, the sun was just beginning to rise. The air was crisp with impending frost. She returned to the same townhouse where she'd stayed before. Trys hobbled into the house and dropped onto the narrow, dusty couch. He took one look at the stairs, winced, and declared he would stay where he was for the evening. Elia wheeled the enchanted bicycle right into the living room and leaned it against the wall. She'd leave it as payment for all the things she'd borrowed from the house, if the owners ever returned. Cuddles arrived after dark and stood in the doorway, looking curiously into the house.

"Come in," she said to the Slyn. "No one lives in this town, so you can stay with us tonight. Sleep on the floor beside Trys. I'm going to the bedroom upstairs. We'll leave at sundown. Get some rest."

That afternoon, Elia bolted up from the depths of sleep when Trys yelled. She ran out of the bedroom and flew down the stairs. He was sitting up straight, eyes enormous.

"I forgot about the Slyn, and when I woke up, his head was resting on my legs. He's huge, Elia. Why is he still with us?"

She laughed. "Cuddles and I have a bargain. He's coming home with us, where he won't be hunted. He'll guard us."

Trys looked like he might be sick. "I don't know."

"Well, I do. He stays." She tried to keep her voice calm, commanding. No question for him to answer. It was a test to see how far their agreement went.

Trys glanced between her and the Slyn, who was snoring again. "He's your responsibility, then. If he hurts anyone—"

"He won't. It's part of our bargain. He'll live on livestock and wild animals. I'll make sure he's careful and cared for."

Trys shook his head. "Fine."

When the sun had begun its descent, they made a quick meal of hard cheese and dark bread she'd brought back from Risson. Tears stung Elia's eyes as she used her last vial of Papa's blood to enchant the door of the townhouse. They would arrive in a storehouse on Trys's estate. It would be better than bursting through his front door and shocking all the servants.

As she slipped the empty vial into her pocket, she felt the Serraturan token Joran had given her. Elia glanced down at the coin to study Violetta's face glimmering in the moonglow of the coronet. If she could unlock Trys's curse, perhaps, when the time was right, she could return to Serratura and unbind the plague from its citizens. From Violetta. Her heart lifted with the thought, and she prayed Runa would give her the chance. Even if it took years, it was the penance Serratura deserved from her.

After unlocking the door, she supported Trys as he hobbled through. Cuddles followed close behind them, massive tail tucked as he crossed the threshold. It was nighttime in Isalindra, and the estate was quiet.

As they made their way across the shadowy grounds, Trys paused to point out a small white barn.

"My mother had a brief hobby of breeding miniature horses," he said. "It was a diversion that she quickly tired of, and no one bothered to tear down the barn after the horses were all sold. Hardly anyone goes in there anymore. It's an excellent place for Cuddles to stay until we can come up with something better."

They made sure the Slyn was comfortable in the barn and had fresh water. Elia promised to return with meat as soon as she was able. After they were certain he was secure, Trys and Elia continued down the path to the main house.

"Let's use the servants' entrance," he said when they finally reached the house. He was pale with exhaustion. "It's closer and won't cause as much fuss."

He was right about half of that. When they entered, a servant screamed and clutched her chest. As the other servants who lived on the estate popped their heads out of their quarters, she took deep breaths.

"Apologies, Your Highness. I didn't know to expect you, and I didn't recognize you in those clothes at first." Her hands still shook a little as she curtsied.

Murmurs of *His Highness has returned* spread down the hall like wildfire. The door on the farthest end of the hall burst open and Trys's steward sprinted toward them.

He quickly bowed at the waist and then pulled Trys's arm over his own shoulders. "Call a Healer," he shouted at the scurrying servants. "His Highness requires assistance." He barked other orders at people as well. A bath, a fire in the master bedroom, hot food, tea, fresh clothing, guest

quarters prepared. Finally he looked at Trys. “Your uncle His Majesty informed us that you were on an extended holiday with Conjurista Tallis, but he did not tell us when to expect your return. Forgive my saying so, but it does not look like it was an enjoyable holiday for you.”

Trys huffed a laugh even as his head dropped to his chest. “You might say that.”

The steward glanced back at Elia, whose steps flagged as she trailed them through the house. “Shall we prepare the carriage to return the Conjurista to her home?”

Elia opened her mouth to reluctantly agree, but Trys spoke first. “No. That won’t be necessary. Elia is my betrothed and will be staying in the residence whenever she likes. Beginning tonight.”

The steward’s eyebrows lifted nearly to his hairline, but all he said was, “Very good, Your Highness. We shall see to her every comfort.”

Between their sluggish pace and the sheer size of the estate, the walk to Trys’s quarters felt interminable. By the time they arrived, a fire was crackling in his hearth, and two servants bustled about the room. They halted to bow as Trys entered, and one of them moved forward to help him into a cushy leather chair by the fire.

“Come, Conjurista Tallis. I’ll show you to your rooms.” The steward gestured to the hallway.

“You can call me Elia,” she said vacantly, but she made no move to follow him.

The servants removed Trys’s shoes and placed a steaming mug in his hands. A prickle of worry made her hesitate. She’d been the one seeing to Trys’s every need for the last few days. She alone knew exactly what he’d been through. How could these admittedly attentive servants care for him if they thought he’d merely been on a holiday that took a sour turn?

“As you please, ma’am.” The steward followed her gaze. “He’s in the best possible hands. We’ve been serving His Highness for years. Please, follow me.”

Numbly, she followed him out the door. Trys didn’t seem to notice she was gone. He didn’t even glance her way. To her surprise, the steward didn’t go far. He opened the door across the hall with a gentle smile.

“Your quarters, ma’am. On the desk, you’ll find an important letter. The witch who delivered it threatened to curse ten generations of my family tree

if I didn’t give it to you immediately upon your arrival.” He pursed his lips in distaste.

A rush of affection passed through her. “Rinna-Grivya. She left me a message?”

Another servant waited to assist her, but Elia ignored everyone and hurried to the desk. Grivya’s enchanted black seal marked the small scroll. Elia held her breath as she popped the seal and unrolled the letter.

Myron is safe. I happened to be visiting when the godstouch broke and I insisted he come with me. Elia paused to laugh. She could only imagine what that “insistence” looked like to the priests. She almost felt sorry for them. Almost. *He’ll stay with the Sweet-weaver’s family until you come home. You owe us both a pile of gold for managing everything while you were gone. I’ll see you when you return. —G*

Elia grinned at the paper. Myron was all right. Better than all right. He was no longer under Morthanos’s thumb. She could go get him right now if she wanted. The steward cleared his throat behind her, and the lingering servant shuffled on her feet. She’d get him tomorrow. He would be safe with the Leonins one more night.

After Elia had been given a tour of the room and its amenities, the steward showed her how to ring a silent, enchanted bell that would alert a servant if she needed anything. Then they left her to settle in. The room was sumptuous and finely appointed. Elia felt out of place in her travel-stained, threadbare clothes. There was no way she could crawl into the oversized pillowy bed smelling of Slyn, sweat, and gods only knew what else. She stripped off everything and headed for the washroom. Sweet gods, there was an enormous tub with a lavender-scented bubble bath waiting and fresh nightclothes laid out for her on a nearby dresser. She could have cried at the luxurious bliss.

After her bath, Elia could barely keep her eyes open as she moved about her quarters. She was about to collapse into bed when someone tapped a quiet rhythm on her door. Elia pulled her dressing gown tight and opened the door. Trys stood in the hallway, wearing a worn set of flannel pajamas.

She lifted an eyebrow. “Shouldn’t a prince wear silk to bed?”

He looked away. “I still have nightmares about . . . well, all of it. I just wanted to be warm and comfortable.”

All teasing about his pajamas died on her lips. She took his hands in hers and squeezed.

“I’ll be right here across the hall. If you call, I’ll come right away.”

He nodded, and his throat bobbed. “If that’s what you want, I won’t argue, but it’s a bit too far for my preferences.”

Elia raised an eyebrow. “Would you like me to sleep in a chair next to your bed?”

An adorable blush crept up his neck. “Still too far, I think.”

She’d walk through any darkness for the chance to flirt with him just like this. “Perhaps I should curl up at the foot of your bed, like a favored dog. Outside the covers, of course.”

He pulled her close and folded her in his arms. She could feel every muscle and curve of his body through those thin pajamas. “Still too far.”

“Next to you outside the covers?” she breathed.

He lowered his face and nuzzled her neck. “Too far.”

“You’ll have to tell me what you want, then.” She could barely speak. Her whole body tingled as he caressed her back and played with her hair.

He kissed her gently and said, “In my arms seems right.”

Before she could say anything, his lips found hers again, and he guided her across the hall, never breaking the kiss.

As they snuggled under his covers, he ran his hand down the side of her silk nightgown and whispered into her ear, “Thank you, Elia. For bringing me back.”

Her eyes burned. “I’d do it a thousand times. I’d reach into the darkest void and drag you back, and if I couldn’t get you out, I’d build another house made of night and live there with you. You’re mine, Trystoferian Alexios Magnus Felipe Lightdragon. Nothing you do can change that now. I’ll always stay with you.”

He covered her neck and shoulder in kisses. “Thank you,” he murmured into her hair. “Thank you. I—” He pulled back. His spice-brown eyes were such a welcome sight after the fathomless black of the beast’s unblinking voids. He shifted toward her, closing the tiny space between them. “I love you,” he said against her lips.

She held him tighter and drank in the sound of those words. How many times had she imagined them in the lonely weeks on that dark battlefield? How often had she dreamed of just this? Then she pulled back and said, “I love you too, of course. But you knew that.”

His eyes sparked mischievously, full lips parting in a grin. “Well, I certainly hope you wouldn’t endure the darkness and the carnage of that

battlefield for just anyone.”

Elia gave a fake yawn. “Oh, I drain my magic dry and become Godsworn for acquaintances all the time.” She tapped his nose. “Ridiculous Prince Smudge.”

He pursed his lips with feigned disappointment. “I can’t believe you waited so long to tell me.”

“*Me?* I was waiting for you.”

He pouted. “I’ve been out of sorts for some time, as you well know. In fact, I don’t think I’ll fully recover unless you say it to me every day. No, every hour. As often as possible.”

She embraced him tightly. “I love you, needy prince.”

“And I you, cruel Conjurista.”

He kissed her again. And when their lips met this time, it wasn’t the burning fervor of their stolen moment in the library. It was the sweet, shy kiss of something new and bright.

OceanofPDF.com

34

Elia woke early the next morning, eager to bring Myron home. Trys was still asleep, and the Royal Healer was monitoring him. She left him a note and awkwardly asked the servants to prepare a room for Myron next to hers. Giving orders to anyone other than her siblings was strange, but the servants didn't hesitate to agree. Several of them seemed delighted at the thought of having a child in the house and went to retrieve some of Trys's childhood things from storage. Elia also gave the whole staff a warning about Cuddles. News of his presence on the ground was met with a range of reactions from grim annoyance to abject terror. She did her best to assuage everyone's fears by communicating the particulars of her bargain with the Slyn. Hopefully they would learn to coexist.

It was late morning by the time Elia arrived at the bakery. Decadent scents of cake and sweet breads wafted onto the busy street in front of Leonin's. The bell over the door jingled cheerfully as Elia entered. Maisie's head peeked out of the kitchen, and whatever she'd been about to say died on her lips. Her hands flew to her mouth as she let out a half gasp, half laugh. Before Elia could take more than two steps into the shop, her friend was flying at her, whooping and grinning.

Maisie threw her arms around Elia's neck and bounced up and down, her auburn coils springing with her. "You're back! Thank all the gods! I was so worried for you! We all were."

Maisie's familiar fragrance of lavender soap, vanilla, and flour brought tears to Elia's eyes. "I missed you too."

Andek appeared and caught her up in a fierce bear hug. "I knew you'd get the job done." He gave her a teasing grin. "But you sure took your time. We thought we were going to get to keep our helpful little buddy, but I guess you want him back, eh?"

"He's all mine now." Elia laughed at Andek's good-natured disappointment. "But I can send him back to visit sometimes."

"He's always welcome here," Andek replied with a genuine smile.

Elia leaned with her forearms on the glass pastry counter. “I’m surprised the death temple let him go. That Baestran didn’t find some reason why Myron would need to stay.”

Maisie shook her head. “Rinna-Grivya threatened those priests and acolytes within an inch of their lives if they didn’t give Myron back. Remind me to stay on her good side.”

They all laughed. It was all too easy for Elia to imagine how that must have gone down.

“How is he? Is he . . . healthy?” She gave a meaningful look at Maisie. Had Myron acted differently after the rite? Had he been able to sleep?

Maisie bit her lower lip and glanced at the door to the family quarters. “At first, he had nightmares. I don’t know what kinds of things he saw at the temple, and he won’t talk about it. But after a few weeks of consistent counseling and mind healing, he started sleeping normally with no bad dreams. We’ve kept a close eye on him, but he is truly improving every day. And he hasn’t had any more visions or prophecies. It seems like Morthanos is done with him. But, Elia . . .” Her eyes filled with a sweet mingling of hope and concern. “You should know he isn’t the same. He doesn’t laugh or smile as easily as he did. Sometimes, he struggles with speaking. The Healers have reassured us that he will get better over time. But he may never be the Myron he was before.”

If Elia could get away with it, she’d punch every priest in that death temple and Baestran twice for all Myron had endured. And then she’d burn down the temple. But any of those things would be a death sentence.

“I understand. We’ll keep working on whatever he needs,” Elia promised.

Maisie nodded and then looked Elia over. “I’m sure you have quite the tale. And much has happened here too. The king signed a treaty with Elantika a couple of weeks ago, and there’s to be a huge festival in a few days. They say it’s all due to a giant monster that neither king could fight. We’ve been baking up a storm to prepare.”

“A treaty? That’s wonderful. I can’t wait to tell Trys.” Elia beamed at her friend. Trys would be beside himself. “I want to hear all the details about that and anything else, but for now, I’m going to bring Myron home. I’ll tell you my story later too.”

Maisie embraced her again. “Yes. With cake. It’s important to have cake when discussing victory.” She released Elia and squeezed her hands. “Truly,

Myron is fine."

Elia exhaled shakily and nodded. But something in her wouldn't settle until she saw him with her own eyes. "Where is he?"

Andek pointed to the kitchen. "He's been washing batter bowls and pans after this morning's bake. I'll miss having that help. Myron!"

He called Myron three times before he emerged from the family quarters. Myron was wearing a stained apron and dish gloves. He'd gotten suds in his hair. Elia's heart melted at the sight of him. Tears stung her eyes as she studied him from head to toe. He truly *was* fine. Physically, anyway.

"Elia!" he shouted, and ran to her. He threw his arms around her waist, soapy gloves and all.

She laughed and squeezed him so hard he complained. Every dark, lonely moment on the battlefield, bargains with witches and monsters and a goddess, a dangerous arcane rite—all of it had won her this moment. She'd gladly do it again to see his sweet smile clear of Morthanos's dark power.

After a moment, Elia asked, "Are you ready to go to our new home? We're going to be staying at Prince Trystoferian's big estate from now on." She paused when Myron's eyes grew wide. "You'll get to have your own room."

Myron gave a tentative look at the Leonins. "Is it okay for me to go?"

His question was so quiet Elia almost didn't hear him. Shadows crept into his eyes. Before his time as a Deathfate, Myron would have been excited at the thought of his very own room in a manor with so many places to explore. But this Myron was subdued, uncertain, and still a little afraid. Elia couldn't blame him for asking permission from the people who'd been caring from him for months. She promised herself she'd never leave him for that long again.

Maisie gave Myron an encouraging nod, even as her eyes welled. "Of course, sweetheart. Go with your sister. We'll still be here, and you can visit anytime."

Myron ran to hug her, and Andek wrapped his arms around them both. After a moment, Myron tearfully promised to return soon.

As Elia walked with him through the bright streets toward Trys's estate, she told him all about her journey to the battlefield and the rite she'd performed to free him. Myron had dozens of questions about Runa, and Elia's bargain with the goddess. When she explained her decision to stay and help Trys, Myron looked pleased and said it was the right thing to do.

Elia hadn’t realized before that moment how much she’d needed him to understand why she hadn’t run right home to take him from the temple.

“I was trusting Rinna-Grivya and Maisie to take care of you.”

“They did.” He smiled. “Rinna-Grivya was funny when she took me home. She did a lot of shouting and threatening. They let me go after that.” He looked at her with a thoughtful expression. “I’m glad you stayed to help Trys. But I still missed you a lot.”

She grinned. “I missed you too, little one.”

“I’m *not* little,” he play-pouted.

“You certainly are not.” She threw an arm around his shoulders. “But you’ll always be my little brother.”

Near the northern gate of Isalindra, they passed one of the smaller death temples. Myron shivered, and she pulled him close to her side. He’d likely always be sensitive to Morthanos’s magic, but it no longer controlled his life.

Eventually, she’d have to tell him the price of his freedom, that he’d never have magic of his own. To Elia, it was a small price to pay, but he’d been so looking forward to discovering his magic. Delivering that news was going to hurt. But maybe his time with the Leonins would help. Andek had done well for himself as a Stricken. He could become a role model for Myron. But that conversation could wait. For now, her heart leaped to see him whole and well and safely returned to her.

Trys was waiting for them with an obscene amount of lunch and a huge smile when they returned. He still looked too pale, too thin, and beyond tired. But the desperate edge of exhaustion was gone. He looked less in need of a healing house and more in need of a good nap. Myron eyed the food with unreserved wonder.

When he bowed to Trys, the prince would have none of it.

“We’re brothers now, Myron. Family. There’s no need to bow or call me anything other than Trys.”

When he pulled Myron into a big hug, Trys’s eyes danced with something even brighter than the scholar’s spark she’d seen in the past. It was hope. Shining new and radiant.

And she felt it too. What lay before her now was not an absence of purpose, not some ambiguous life, but a future of her own making, pure and sweet as the brightest dawn.

OceanofPDF.com

Epilogue

Three Months Later

The royal ballroom was decked in gold and green. Gold for prosperity and green for the growth of a new union. Enchanted vines climbed the walls, laden with glittering trumpet flowers that played an intricate wedding melody. Guests in ornate gowns and elaborate headpieces mingled with priestesses of Runa and Nalani.

“Stop peeking,” Maisie commanded, pulling Elia back from the window overlooking the ballroom. Maisie’s emerald-and-gold gown perfectly offset her auburn hair. Andek was going to drool when he saw her.

“She’s right,” Grivya snapped. “It’s bad luck. Besides, we need to put the finishing touches on your hair. Saya, hop off that couch and come help me.” Grivya handed Saya a box of jeweled pins, and then pulled a black velvet box out of her satchel. “A gift from the coven. It’s yours to keep.”

Maisie and Saya gasped as Grivya withdrew the moonstone coronet that had been Elia’s light in the darkness.

Tears pricked Elia’s eyes. Witches never gave anything away for free. Grivya must have made a bargain for it. For her. “I hardly know what to say.”

“Thank you would be a start,” Grivya grumbled as she stabbed a pin into Elia’s scalp.

“Thank you,” Elia murmured. “For everything, Rinna. I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

The dear old witch snorted. “Dead, probably.” She angled Elia’s head and surveyed her work. “I won’t enchant it to stay on this time. It’s not exactly a discreet accessory for your new life.”

“Are you still leaving when it’s over?” Saya asked.

Elia met her sister’s eyes in the mirror and gave her a sad smile. “We have to.”

A showy royal wedding had been a strategic move by the king to serve a threefold purpose: It fulfilled the bargain he'd made with Elia. The celebration extended the war victory festivities, which were good for morale and the economy. And their *extended honeymoon*, as the king was vaguely calling it, would remove Trys from court for ten years. The publicly undisclosed duration was long enough that the unsavory rumors of his involvement with the battlefield monster would die down before his eventual return. It wasn't exactly a banishment; Trys would keep his title and holdings. But removing him from the public eye meant he would no longer be the center of controversy and a political liability to the king.

Saya's lip wobbled, but she managed not to cry. "I spent my entire allowance this month on a stack of enchanted stationery. I want a letter at least once a week, so I don't worry about you."

"Same," Maisie declared, placing the final pin. "A decade is too long not to see my best friend." She gave Elia a tight hug and spun her to face the mirror. "Look at you. Normally, you're beautiful, my dear Elia. But today, you're resplendent."

"I've never imagined seeing a dress this extravagant, let alone wearing one." Elia ran her hand over the impossibly soft emerald velvet and marveled at the intricate threadlore. Orin had designed ensembles for the entire wedding party, and the Royal Sartorialist's staff had worked at breakneck speed to finish them on time. But rather than spinning a tale, the threadlore on her skirt depicted prayers to Nalani for love and fidelity and prayers to Runa for fortune and happiness.

The door opened behind her, and Myron poked his head in. "Wow, you look pretty, Elia." His sweet smile glowed brighter than any of the jewels she was wearing. "Your threadlore matches Trys."

"Come here," she said softly, and wrapped him in a tight hug.

This was the hardest part about the extended honeymoon. Leaving Myron. After today, the next time she saw him, he'd be an adult. The king had taken an immediate liking to her youngest brother when Elia had brought her family for her official presentation as Trys's betrothed, and His Majesty insisted on moving Myron to the palace for "a lord's education."

"We will *not* have an uneducated Stricken lordling in the royal household," he'd declared. "Myron shall be tutored alongside my nieces and nephews, and he *will* outshine them at every turn so no one questions my judgment in joining a common family to mine."

Myron would have an education and opportunities that would be the envy of even the most talented mages. He'd be in the best hands possible. But Elia wouldn't see him. After all the suffering and sacrifice she'd endured to save him, in the end, she'd still lose him. She'd miss his childhood. But at least he would have one. A relatively normal one, with laughter and playmates and ordinary adventures that ended in bumps and bruises and tall tales. It was everything she'd wanted for him and more.

"I'm going to use almost all of Saya's stationery writing to you," she said, kissing the top of his head.

"Hey," Saya said with mock affront, "I heard that."

Isak and Orin entered, and Orin grinned at her in the mirror.

"Your scholar is finally wearing something nice." He smirked.

Elia crossed the room and crushed Orin to her chest.

"No sudden turns," he yelped. "The train is the best part. It must stay intact."

"I love you so much." Elia laughed. "The next time I see you, the whole court will be wearing your fashions and calling you *Master Sartorialist*."

"Naturally," he sniffed. But his watery smile belied how much her words had meant to him.

"Isak, get over here," Elia called.

Isak set down the flute of sparkling white wine and approached. Glancing at Orin first, he hugged Elia gingerly. "Don't leave me out of the letters," he said quietly.

"Of course not." She held him more fiercely than she ever had. "I'm counting on you to watch out for the others. I'd better hear about all of it. Good and bad."

When she released him, she met his eyes and was startled to see tears in his. Fishing a handkerchief out of her pocket, she dabbed at his face.

"I hope you and Trys have every happiness." He gently took the handkerchief from her and stepped back. "You deserve it."

An attendant tapped at the door. "Lady Elia, all is ready."

She looked at each of her siblings and her dearest friend one last time, etching their faces into her memory. "I'll be back," she promised. "Ten years will be up before you know it. I can't wait to see you all again."

After another round of hugs, they all filed out to take their places for Elia and Trys's entrance in the ballroom. The attendant brought Elia to the

landing of a grand staircase where Trys was waiting to take her arm. If anyone looked resplendent today, it was him.

His ordeal had left him thinner than before, and he was plagued by nightmares. Regaining his strength and appetite had been a slow process that was still underway. But today, his face was radiant. He drank in the sight of her, his beloved freckles shifting with the soft smile he gave her.

At a signal from the priestess, everyone in the ballroom knelt and closed their eyes. The first view of a couple on their union day was always given to Nalani through her priestess. The deep gold of the setting sun filtered through the windows, illuminating the priestess's outstretched arms.

"Approach, lovers. Come forth, celebrated betrothed. Let the goddess look upon your faces and bless your union." She spoke in a melodic tone that carried to every corner of the cavernous ballroom.

As they descended the stairs, Trys pulled her close and whispered, "You look like a dream come true. I won't have a single nightmare tonight."

Elia gave him a sly look. "You won't sleep at all if I have anything to say about it."

He coughed as his face flushed that lovely deep copper she'd never grow weary of.

Later, after the union ceremony and the dancing and feasting and white lies about their honeymoon travel plans, Runa's priestess approached them and beckoned them to follow her to a small table that had been set apart for the newlyweds' use. While no one could hear their conversation, any onlookers probably assumed the priestess was offering them a blessing from Runa. She and Elia had been in contact regarding Elia's divine obligations. The goddess had agreed to let Elia begin her service in Serratura.

"It'll be nearly midnight in Serratura when the goddess transports you to your palace rooms. Your belongings are already waiting for you there," she said.

Elia's palms began to sweat. "And the queen?" What was her name again?

"Runa's Fate spoke to her. Only a goddess could have countermanded the queen's execution edict. Though you'll be allowed to stay in secret without fear for your life, you'll be confined to the palace with occasional visits to the library. Due to the memory plague's mysterious, mixed medical and magical nature, the queen has doubts about the possibility of your success. But she's willing to allow you to try."

Elia sagged in relief. “And will Runa allow me to access my magic at will?”

“So long as you’re working to unlock the plague, Runa is pleased to let you serve her in this way. For now. Be prepared to expend your magic to its dregs, even with Runa’s help. If you fail, you’ll have to leave.” The priestess turned to Trys. “Runa is amused by you and encourages you to return to your Serraturan studies with the local scholars. But you must swear not to attempt to access any locked vaults without the queen’s express permission.”

Trys bowed and said, “I’m grateful for the queen’s mercy and Runa’s advocacy. I vow to stay out of locked vaults where I am not invited. This I swear by blood and breath.”

The priestess laughed. “I’m not the one who requires your oath, prince. Save it for the Serraturan queen.” She looked back at Elia. “We’ll go when you’re ready.”

Elia took Trys’s hand and laced their fingers together. “Are you ready to leave home for a while?”

His answering grin made her want to kiss him again right then and there. “Home is wherever you are. Therefore, I *can’t* leave home as long as I’m with you.”

Elia pulled his face to hers. “Sentiments like that are exactly why I’m keeping you forever.”

She kissed him firmly on the lips, and cheers and clinking glasses erupted around the ballroom. Trys pulled her to the throne, where they bowed and took their leave of the king. He gave a lewd, half-tipsy blessing, a sloppy wink, and bade them go enjoy their honeymoon. The revelers showered them with flower petals as Trys and Elia walked out the grand entrance. The priestess waited just outside the door and chanted a benediction over their clasped hands, calling down good fortune for all of their days.

She led them to the courtyard fountain. “When you cross to the other side of the fountain, you’ll be in Serratura. Good luck, lovers.” She smiled at them and turned her back to maintain reverent secrecy to Runa’s magic.

The air in front of them shimmered. Like a veil of magic wafting in a breeze they couldn’t feel.

“After you, husband.” Elia gestured at the veil.

“Alongside you, wife.” Trys hooked her arm through his, and together they passed through the veil into their new life.

OceanofPDF.com

Acknowledgments

I wrote the first words that would become *Unlock the Dark* in 2020 when the world was on fire. We were all shut in and afraid of getting sick. I was pregnant with my first child, and I wanted to fill a book with things that sparked joy in the darkness of that time (first kisses, eccentric witches, magical libraries with trained lemurs, curses, monsters, and brave girls, to name a few). What a journey it has been from then to now.

To my family and friends, who made it possible to bring this story to life, I am so thankful for your support. Thank you to my husband, who encouraged me and had my back unfailingly throughout this entire adventure. And thank you to my children, who are a daily reminder that anything is possible with a little bit of hope and a lot of patience. Thank you to my parents for never flinching when I said I want to be a writer when I grow up, and thank you, along with my in-laws, for the endless hours of childcare and home management as I worked on editing this book. It was no small feat with three children under three at the time.

To Sierra Pung, my critique partner, who became as dear as family and a vital part of my life, I am endlessly grateful for you. For always making space for another pass, for responding to every silly late-night text, for always believing in me, for creating the most exquisite stories for me to read, for the ideas and notes that transformed my work into its best self, for being the magnificent person you are . . . thank you.

To Amy Giuffrida, my amazing agent, thank you for seeing something special in my words and giving me a chance. Because of you, my dream came true. I am so lucky to have you as my champion. To the rest of the A-team, y'all are the best. Thank you for your kind words of encouragement and positivity. I am cheering for all of you! I especially want to call out Natasha Hanova, Nikki Turner, and T.C. Kemper. Thank you for reading and giving notes with short notice. To Paulette Kennedy, thank you for being an early beta reader for this book and giving so many great notes and encouragement.

To my editor extraordinaire, Sarah Homer, I have loved every part of working with you. Your insights, notes, and ideas helped me make this book shine. I am so thankful for how much you loved this story, and I am so excited for our next book together.

To Maria Tureaud, winning #RevPit and working with you was life altering. You helped me see the potential in the earliest draft of this story, and the friendship we formed along the way is such a treasure. I will always be in your corner, and I am so excited to celebrate your success.

To Hilary Davies-Shelby and Kelly White, thank you for being some of the dearest friends I could ever ask for. Your encouragement and humor always make me smile, even during the hard times. This would be a much lonelier journey without you.

To the HarperCollins team who worked on this book: Tara Weikum, Jon Howard, Gwen Morton, Heather Bosch, Kathy Lam, Celeste Knudsen, Annabelle Sinoff, Audrey Diestelkamp, John Sellers, and the HarperCollins sales team. Thank you for all your time and care with this book. I appreciate you more than I can say.

To Kelly Chong, my jaw dropped when I saw your cover art for this book. I absolutely adore it, and I am so thankful you were my cover artist. Thank you for your gorgeous work.

To Kaylie Smith, massive thanks for writing a delightfully witty blurb for this book! It means the world to me.

And to my readers, I am honored that my book found a home in your hands. Thank you for giving this new author a chance.

OceanofPDF.com

About the Author

Photo courtesy of the author

SASA HAWK is lives in Tennessee with her family and mountains of books. When she isn’t writing or running after her children, you can find her nose-deep in a good story, working in the garden, or watching anime and Marvel shows. *Unlock the Dark* is her debut novel. Visit her online at sasahawk.com.

Discover great authors, exclusive offers, and more at hc.com.

OceanofPDF.com

Back Ad

DISCOVER
your next favorite read

MEET
new authors to love

WIN
free books

SHARE
infographics, playlists, quizzes, and more

WATCH
the latest videos

www.epicreads.com

OceanofPDF.com

Copyright

Storytide is an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

UNLOCK THE DARK. Copyright © 2025 by Sasa Hawk. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the nonexclusive, nontransferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse-engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins e-books.

www.epicreads.com

COVER ART © 2025 BY KELLY CHONG
COVER DESIGN BY KATHY H. LAM

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023944785

Digital Edition FEBRUARY 2025 ISBN: 978-0-06-333505-9
Print ISBN: 978-0-06-333503-5

First Edition

OceanofPDF.com

About the Publisher

Australia
HarperCollins Publishers Australia Pty. Ltd.
Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street
Sydney, NSW 2000, Australia
www.harpercollins.com.au

Canada
HarperCollins Publishers Ltd
Bay Adelaide Centre, East Tower
22 Adelaide Street West, 41st Floor
Toronto, Ontario, M5H 4E3
www.harpercollins.ca

India
HarperCollins India
A 75, Sector 57
Noida
Uttar Pradesh 201 301
www.harpercollins.co.in

New Zealand
HarperCollins Publishers New Zealand
Unit D1, 63 Apollo Drive
Rosedale 0632
Auckland, New Zealand
www.harpercollins.co.nz

United Kingdom
HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF, UK

www.harpercollins.co.uk

United States
HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
195 Broadway
New York, NY 10007
www.harpercollins.com

OceanofPDF.com